



THE KAYLES OF BUSHY LODGE



VERA
DWYER



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THE KAYLES OF BUSHY LODGE

AN AUSTRALIAN STORY

BY

VERA G. DWYER



LONDON
HUMPHREY MILFORD
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
MACRAE LIMITED, CHATHAM

PR
6007
D97K

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CHAPTER I

ABSOLUTE PROOF

THE pleasant hum of voices and clinking of cups and saucers in Fall's Tea Room had begun to subside, for it was late afternoon. Green-frooked waitresses stood idly about near vacant tables, very limp in reaction from the four to five bustle in a November heat wave; the girl at the desk gave change languidly, and did not volunteer the prices of the elaborate boxes of sweets on the stand beside her, as was her custom when anyone lingered near them for a few moments.

Two girls and a tall, slender lady had just entered the room. I mention the girls first because it was they who had led the way from the door and selected a table, while the lady—she was young and pretty, and indulgent-looking—had meekly followed them, and now smilingly took the chair they directed her to occupy.

But when she was seated, she spoke in a protesting and slightly bewildered voice.

"Of all the unreasonable, the mad, and entirely incomprehensible children that *ever* I met——" she began.

Her companions laughed, and one of them answered her remark before it was finished.

"No, we're not," she said.

But their companion maintained, in a humorously aggrieved tone, that they were, and then demanded an explanation of their extraordinary behaviour.

It was certainly a natural request. She had brought them to town to see the shops and a picture show, and to finish up the afternoon with strawberries and cream. Out in the street, a few minutes before, she had asked them where they would like to go for their strawberries, proffering, at the same time, her opinion that Fall's was the nicest place in all Sydney.

But, "No," said they, "let it be 'The Golden Grotto!' It's so much more *romantic* than Fall's."

She had reminded them that "The Golden Grotto" was a rather stifling place on a hot day, that the music at Fall's was always beautiful, that it was getting late, and they were right opposite Fall's at the moment. But they had overruled all her arguments. They didn't want to go to Fall's a bit, they said; they loved the "Grotto," with its prettily shaded lights, its *sweet* alcoves, and its decorations of white and gold.

And then Nancy had uttered an ejaculation, had spoken hastily to Chris, and the

next moment they were both clinging to her arm, exclaiming :

"Come on, let's go to Fall's ! Oh, do, *do* let's go to Fall's, please, Mrs. Chester !"

And forthwith they had hurried her across the road, and through Fall's doorway, and—here they were !

The girls laughed over her bewilderment, as she stated the case, then looked eagerly towards a table, at a little distance to the right of them, and exchanged meaning, sparkling glances.

"I'm afraid," said the elder one—a thin, brown-haired little thing of twelve she was, with wide, dark-blue eyes, and a quaintly serious manner—"I'm afraid it wouldn't be right of Chris and me to tell you anything about it, Mrs. Chester. It isn't our secret, you see."

"But, all the same, we'd love to tell you, wouldn't we, Nancy ?" said Chris, looking appealingly at her sister. Plainly she was bursting to begin telling at once.

Nancy ignored the look.

"There's Miss Kenning up on the platform," she said, in a tone of suppressed excitement. As she spoke, her glance went from the platform at the end of the room where the two girl musicians were established, to that particular table, a little to the right of them, where a tall man in khaki had just taken a seat.

"Well, but Miss Kenning is always here," argued Mrs. Chester. "You hadn't forgotten she would be here when you wanted to go to 'The Grotto,' because I reminded you of the music at this place. And you see her often enough, too—your own music-teacher. Miss Kenning couldn't be the reason of the sudden alteration in your plans."

"And yet she is, in a way," rejoined Nancy, weighing her words carefully. Her glance lingered on the tall soldier.

"This much we can tell you," she went on impressively, after a pause for deliberation, during which she ate the first of her strawberries. "Do you see that soldier sitting over there by himself, Mrs. Chester?"

"I do," returned Mrs. Chester solemnly.

"His name is Adam Deering," said Nancy. "And he's been to the war, and got wounded, and won the Military Medal, and very soon he's going back again."

Mrs. Chester, whose husband was fighting at Gallipoli, listened to these facts with sympathetic interest.

"Son of old Doctor Deering who lives in your street?" she asked.

Chris answered that he was, but that she and Nancy were not personally acquainted with the hero.

"*He's* partly the reason, too, why we wanted to come to Fall's," Nancy observed.

"I just happened to see him go in when we were standing outside a few minutes ago."

"Fancy coming to have afternoon tea all by himself!" said Chris, in a tone of deep significance.

Mrs. Chester looked alarmed.

"It's not part of your plan that we should join him at his solitary repast, is it?" she asked.

They hastened to reassure her.

"We only wanted to look at him," said Nancy, "and—and if we felt it was right to tell you more, we would. As it is—we really had better talk about something else, or I'm afraid we *might* start telling. P'r'aps we've said too much already."

"You may set your minds at rest on that point," said Mrs. Chester, "for I haven't a ghost of an idea what the secret is about."

At the table where sat Adam Deering, "all by himself," that simple warrior, all unconscious of the interest he was creating, had poured out a cup of tea, and had begun to dispose of a tiny sandwich. He was looking towards the platform, where the two young musicians were playing an operatic fantasia for piano and violin.

"She is a wonderful little person, that violinist," said Mrs. Chester. "I always enjoy her playing, and I love watching her face. It's so expressive. I'm glad you didn't take me to 'The Golden Grotto,' children."

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The girls lingered over their strawberries, and Mrs. Chester over her tea. But when they rose to go, the solitary occupant of that near-by table had only just begun upon his second sandwich.

"Did you notice how he gazed at her?" Nancy asked her sister in a low voice, as they waited for Mrs. Chester to receive her change at the desk.

"Rather," answered Chris. "It just proves that everything Rita said was true, doesn't it?"

"All his soul was in his eyes as he looked at her," declared Nancy. "Isn't it absolutely tragic, Chris?"

It was just after they had gone that the girl at the piano, happening to meet Adam Deering's eyes (which held a perfectly calm and indifferent expression at the moment, whatever Nancy's imagination might have helped her to think about the matter), bowed to him aloofly.

She was very pretty, this girl at the piano. Eyes of such sweet, light-filled brownness she had, only mock-serious, you knew at a glance, only mocking, you feared, in their tenderness; straight brown hair, that lay meekly across her forehead, but broke into rebellion, and the tiniest of curls, just above the left ear.

It was, however, mainly towards Shirley Kayle, the violinist, that Adam Deering's

grave attention had been directed, as he drank tea and listened appreciatively to the music, "all by himself," though Nancy and Chris would have been astonished to learn this fact.

She was rather a fragile-looking girl, about nineteen or twenty, with shining, curly hair, and eager blue eyes, and a mouth that had a charming quality of suddenness in its smile, and in the way its delicate corners cut into the softness of her cheeks.

"Oh dear, I *am* sick of this afternoon, Ida," she said, in the pause between the performance of Lemare's "Andantino" and the gay "Spanish Dance" that was to close their programme.

"It *has* seemed extra long and wearisome," agreed Ida, "and the morning went like wildfire, before I was half finished with it."

"If it's no cooler to-morrow," said Shirley, "I'm coming to town in a singlet and a kimono." She sat drooping, her bow trailing from her hand.

Presently she looked at her watch, and sighed, and rose.

"Oh, well," she said, "'on with the dance!'"

But there was no suggestion of her weariness in her music. She played the dance very sparkingly and well, and in the ten minutes that it occupied, she was neither tired, nor eager to get home, nor conscious of the temperature's eighty degrees.

The streets were full of the bustle of homing people at this hour. Ida and Shirley lived in the same suburb, but they parted at the door of Fall's, because the devoted and affluent young man to whom Ida was engaged awaited her there in his car—it was his daily custom so to do.

Shirley went to Elizabeth Street, with the prospect of half an hour's dusty tram journey before her.

She had to stand for one section of the way, balancing herself against the rattling doors. But her expression was particularly contented as she stood there, reading her library book, with an occasional lurch forward as the tram stopped or turned a corner, and she did not once glance in the direction of a stalwart young man who occupied a seat in the same compartment, lest he should imagine she had any desire for him to vacate it in her favour. Shirley was one of those spirited and independent modern girls of whom some men so strongly complain.

In the third section, the dazzling white sandhills of a seaside suburb came into view, and, almost at the end of the line, Shirley hurriedly shut her book, pulled her violin case from under the seat, and alighted.

A few minutes' walking along a quiet side street brought her to a big stone cottage, which had been built many years before the

tram-line had been laid down. It stood far back in a grassy space of ground, well shaded by several old trees—a flowering pittosporum, two Cootamundra wattles, a line of feathery peppers, and a few gums.

Up in the trees, the “locusts” were at their evening carnival of song, and their shrill, joyous music was like a deafening greeting to Shirley at the gate.

She had paused there, not to listen to it, but to look critically at three brass plates—one on the left of the gate, two on the right of it.

On the left was the largest. It bore the inscription,

“MR. EDGAR KAYLE,
DENTIST.”

The top plate, on the right-hand side, said,

“MISS IRENE KAYLE,
TEACHER OF DRAWING AND PAINTING.”

On the third was the legend,

“MISS SHIRLEY KAYLE, L.A.B.,
VIOLIN AND PIANO.”

All three plates were dull and a little tarnished, and Shirley, observing them, flung open the gate with wrathful energy.

“Oh, the little wretch! Oh, the lazy, wicked little wretch!” she said.

CHAPTER II

A LECTURE

THE front door stood open, showing a long vista of shabby hall carpet, with dusty brown-stained wood on either side.

Shirley entered, pushed open the door of the first room on the left, and stood on the threshold, looking in.

There were dead matches in the dusty fireplace, most disconsolately dead flowers in the vases. Dust lay undisturbed on the linoleum, on the mantelpiece, table, and chairs, and the tattered magazines on the table were in sad disarray.

"She's utterly devoid of conscience!" declared Shirley aloud, and crossed the hall to the opposite room—the surgery.

More dust and untidiness here—even the blind was crookedly drawn up, and the floor was still stained with some sticky chemical that had been spilt upon it the day before.

"Oh, it's too bad!" cried Shirley. "It's disgraceful—disgraceful!"

She hastened to the dining-room, and there she came upon the object of her indignation,

and denounced her, in a breath of emphatic language.

"You ought to be shot or hanged, Phyllis," she said, "though, in my opinion, either would be too good for you!"

A girl about three years younger than Shirley was sitting on a book-strewn, broken-sprunged couch, with a magazine in her hands. She was a calm-eyed slip of a girl, dressed in fresh white, with shining, light-brown hair, like Shirley's, pinned up in a soft coil on the back of her shapely head.

The lazily humorous expression of her face was rather attractive, but at the moment it held no sort of attraction for Shirley.

She smiled tolerantly in response to the latter's vigorous denunciation.

"Greeting, sister," she said.

"If it were not for your disgraceful callousness," stormed Shirley, "you'd feel hurt! If it were not for your utter lack of conscience, you'd feel ashamed!"

"I *am* hurt," responded the other calmly. "I'm cut to the quick by your misplaced abuse, but I refuse to be ashamed. I'm in a state of self-satisfaction bordering upon the smug. I am excusably proud of myself. I've had a big day."

Then to Shirley came a moment's hope of having to eat her words, a moment's visioning of scrubbed pantry shelves, of a bushel

of plums made into jam, of a basket-full of white clothes ironed and put away.

"What have you been doing?" she asked, half mollified already.

"As soon as you went this morning, I washed up the breakfast things," replied Phyllis. "Then I went along to the library in the tram to change my book. After that I came home and read the book—a long one, too—with lunch for an interlude. And then I set the dinner-table."

She smiled, and blew a kiss towards Shirley's exasperated countenance.

"Get your dinner, child," she added soothingly. "Rene's busy, and said you were not to wait for her. She'll come when she's ready."

Shirley's glance swept the table. It had been carelessly laid for seven, five of whom had already dined—the dishes and cutlery they had used were still uncleared from the five places.

There was some cold corned beef under a wire cover upon the table, there was bread and there was butter, and also there was jam—at the bottom of a sticky-rimmed dish. Table decorations were conspicuously absent, the cloth was a little tea-stained, and at the place where the youngest usually sat three large drops of yesterday's gravy, stiff and dry now, were an additional offence to a fastidious eye.

"What a squalid table!" exclaimed Shirley, with much bitterness.

"I agree with you," said Phyllis.

"You *might* have made a salad," resumed Shirley. "I bought a lettuce and a cucumber from the vegetable man before I left home."

"It's no use, little love," said Phyllis. "I've been Father's own girl to-day. I felt it in my bones when I got up this morning. The result is unfortunate, but——"

"Oh dear!" said Shirley. She sat down, her hat still on, and began, suddenly, to cry.

"And Ida is coming this evening!" she said.

"Dear me, I forgot about her," said Phyllis, secretly distressed by the tears. "But what does it matter? The absence of a maid justifies the presence of dust. Don't forget to remark once or twice what a dilemma we are still in without a maid." She came towards the table as she spoke, and began to cut thin slices from the round of beef.

"I did expect you to polish the brass plates, at least," said Shirley. "Bobby forgot them, as usual, and you know what a breathless hurry I was in, yesterday and to-day."

"Ida won't notice the plates, anyhow. It will be dark when she gets here," Phyllis reminded her.

"You might have done something to the

waiting-room and the surgery!" went on Shirley, still passionately reproachful.

"I looked at them," answered Phyllis, "but their appearance disheartened me, so I left them alone, and kept cool and pleasant. But why be distressed over them to-night? Ida won't investigate the whole house, surely, and, since she is so particular, I'll give this room a flick round in her honour before she gets here, so eat your dinner, and cheer up."

A little sympathy went a long way with Shirley. She wiped away the last tear, hastened to take off her hat and wash her hands, came back in a few moments, and began her meal.

"We might have time to tidy up a bit before Ida gets here," she murmured. "I'm convinced she is always taking mental notes of our makeshifts and bad management to amuse her family with when she goes home. I daresay we are a byword amongst all her friends."

"I've no objection, I'm sure," laughed Phyllis. "We are a byword amongst our own friends, too, but it doesn't prevent them loving us to distraction, and being almost more numerous that we can cope with."

"But don't you ever worry about your future?" Shirley asked sternly. "Haven't you any ambition at all? Doesn't it disturb you to think of your gloomy prospects?"

"The natural use of my energies is for enjoying life," rejoined Phyllis. "And as for my prospects, my dear, they were never brighter. I grow more beautiful every day, do I not? I keep my hands white, and my brow unruffled by worry lines. So what is to prevent my marrying early and well, even as Myra did?"

She laughed teasingly, but Shirley frowned.

"You are not even trying to qualify yourself for a domestic sphere," she said with scorn. "Besides, you can't make yourself fall in love whenever it's convenient, and if——"

"If no one ever marries me, and *you* don't see why they should?" Phyllis interrupted her gaily. "Oh, I am a very fascinating sort of person in some people's eyes, whatever my family thinks about me. And as for my falling in love opportunely—Myra fell in love with John. I'm not sour and contrariwise. Why shouldn't I fall in love with What's-his-name, bless him? I'm sure he'll be nice."

It was useless to continue arguing with the flippant one.

"Where are the others?" Shirley asked.

"Rene is out in the studio. Father's in the garden, smoking and admiring the weeds. Angus is book-keeping in his room. Peter and Bobby are next door."

"Did Father have any patients to-day?" asked Shirley, after a pause.

Phyllis laughed, in a tolerant, half-pitying way.

"Father spent the morning sitting in his own dental chair, reading," she answered. "After lunch, he went to town. Mrs. Martin came while he was out, and said she had an appointment for three o'clock. She left after waiting half an hour, and she seemed annoyed. When I told Father, he said he had forgotten about the appointment, but that he didn't have Mrs. Martin's plate ready for her, so he couldn't have done anything for her if he had been at home."

"He'll have no practice at all soon," Shirley remarked dispiritedly, and added the next moment :

"To think that anyone sat in that dreadful waiting-room for half an hour ! "

"Well, I don't know how you can expect me to bother about keeping nice the rooms of that sort of dentist, Shirley. Oh, you needn't tell me it might encourage him to take an interest in his work if I did ! He loafed just as much when you were keeping them spotless."

"But it makes me so ashamed for anyone to see them looking neglected," said Shirley. "I've been too busy for anything lately. I haven't any pupils to-morrow morning, though. I'll see what I can do then."

"I may have reformed—slightly—myself, by to-morrow," observed Phyllis. "Who knows ? "

Shirley drew the distant jam-dish towards her with the bread knife, and resumed her lecture.

"Apart from Father's rooms, Phyl," she said, "you have absolutely no excuse for not doing your share towards making the rest of the house more habitable when Rene and I haven't time. It is horrible for the boys to be brought up in such a graceless home."

"Not a bit of it," retorted Phyllis. "Why should I work myself wan in the effort to make home pleasant for three unnoticing and ungrateful brothers? They will make fine, appreciative husbands for having had to rough it a little in their young days. They won't be always holding up their paragon sister Phyllis as a model of domestic virtue to their wives, anyway."

"I don't think they will," said Shirley drily. "But despite all the arguments in favour of laziness you may please to devise, you are going to help me to make sandwiches for supper as soon as we have washed up."

"Oh, very well," answered Phyllis resignedly. "But why you can't be satisfied with easy, ready-to-eat biscuits, I don't know. All this fuss about eating! In war time, too!"

As Shirley scraped the last spoonful of jam from the dish, Rene emerged from the weatherboard studio in the garden, her

figure enveloped in a colour-daubed cotton overall, which she unbuttoned as she came up the weedy path to the house.

She entered the dining-room with a bright greeting for Shirley, declared herself ready to drink nine cups of tea, and took her seat at the table.

Rene was twenty-two. Unlike her sisters, who were most daintily fastidious in the matter of dress, her clothes were generally chosen and put on with a careless indifference to effect. She was not at all depressed to-day in an old print skirt of her own, and a discarded white silk blouse of Shirley's.

Rene was not pretty, but she had a wealth of beautiful, auburn hair, a clever, purposeful face, brilliant brown eyes, and a gay, offhand manner, that was by no means lacking in charm.

Eighteen months ago, Rene had been one of the most absorbed of all the art students of Mr. Morton Stirling, one of Sydney's leading teachers, who had remarked several times, out of her hearing, that she was a rather promising young woman, and that he would be surprised if something did not come of her apprenticeship in his life class. The opinion had reached her ears, of course, and after that, not the most scathing of his criticisms upon her work, from day to day, really discouraged her, although her humility concerning it was sincere and deep.

But the War had caused a sudden and most drastic shrinkage in the family funds. There was positively no money available to pay any more fees to Morton Stirling, which was the more unfortunate because Rene's artistic training under this experienced and clever master had only begun a few months before. It was even necessary that she should earn all the money she wanted for her own spending, and a little over besides. Shirley had already set out to earn her own living when the "promising young woman" nailed a brass plate to her father's front gate, and, worthier pupils failing her, resigned herself to teach "Painting," at cheap rates, to an increasing number of students who refused to learn drawing first. She worked in all her spare hours, with pencil and brush, and saved as many as she was able of the guineas that came to her from the painting lessons towards a return to Morton Stirling, and Art.

"Tears!" Rene exclaimed, with a quick glance at Shirley. "My darling girl, what for?"

"Dust," answered Phyllis from the sofa, "and Ida. And we give you two minutes to eat your dinner, for we all have to set to work to clean the house out before Ida arrives."

Rene laughed.

"Is Ida coming this evening?" she asked. "Poor old Shirley! Visitors are a perfect

nightmare to you, aren't they? Which reminds me. I had *my* favourite nightmare in the small hours of this morning. Listen, Shirley. I dreamt that Mr. Stirling and a lot of his pupils came trooping into my studio. And me there with twenty of *my* pupils, all taking themselves so seriously with their palettes and paint-boxes and coloured copies of swanny rivers, and snow scenes, and ruined castles. You should have heard old Stirling going round poking fun at their work. And all the while, the others were walking about looking at the pictures too, and exclaiming, 'Aren't they *lovely*?' especially when they saw the ready-made, shaded backgrounds on the tin placques. And what with the uncomprehending attitude of my pupils, and the hilarious sarcasm of Mr. Stirling, I woke up laughing and crying together. Truly!"

Shirley looked unhappy.

"Poor Rene, it isn't fair," she began. But Rene interrupted her gaily.

"Nonsense; it kept me laughing all day, and I intend to make up for it to-night by dreaming I've painted a masterpiece which is making old Stirling boast that I was once a pupil of his. Bother it all, anyhow! Has life been nice for you to-day on the whole, little Shirley?"

"Very nice," answered Shirley, "except for the heat." She looked towards the clock

as she spoke, and rose quickly. "You won't mind my starting to clear the table, will you, Rene?" she said. "I don't want to hurry you, but I can be getting a lot of these things taken out and packed up while you are having dinner."

Rene laughed at her, and cut a fresh piece of bread.

"Don't mind me," she said.

So Shirley hastened away with a tray full of dishes, returned a few minutes later, and began gathering up the vases from various quarters of the room.

"Run and pick some poppies and grass, Phyl," she entreated. "Oh, there's such a lot to do!"

Phyllis went out to the garden, gaily trilling the song she had quoted, with a slight alteration, to Shirley, a little while before.

"'If no one ever marries me . . .'" she sang.

"And *I* don't see why they should," she added, in emphatic speech, with a note of fierce self-scorn in her voice.

"And I'd just like to see myself marrying anybody in the world," she finished, with another note in her voice—a proud note now, a defiant, loftily amused note, a new expression, restless, eager, baffled, in her eyes.

She flung out her hands, in a funny little

distracted gesture, and then, humming the air of the song again, slowly, and in a lower key, she began gathering the pink and white poppies, and the grass that stood abreast of them.

CHAPTER III

A WAKEFUL HOUR

AT eight o'clock Ida came.

By eight o'clock Shirley had helped to prepare the supper, had changed her dress, and tidied and dusted the big dining-room, which, so much of the house being given over to professional requirements, served the purpose of drawing-room as well. She had even found time to rub down the stained wood on either side of the hall carpet—quite an unnecessary proceeding, her sisters said, for they had only to turn down the light there to make the dust upon it undiscernible.

It had been rather a scramble, but she had managed to fulfil the most pressing demands of the house for that evening, and her success had made her cheerful once more.

For an hour and a half she and Ida discussed and practised programmes for the next week's recitals at Fall's. Then they sat on the sofa, and talked.

Ida had much to talk about in these days, for she was to be married to her affluent fiancé early in the new year, and she was

living at present in a whirl of shopping, and visits to dressmakers. A wedding and a trousseau such as Ida's were to be meant a great deal of shopping indeed.

Neither Mr. Kayle nor the boys appeared for supper. The former took his coffee on the side verandah, where he had been sitting all the evening, and the boys, upon being summoned, called that they wanted none. Whereat the sisters smiled, but did not press the point. Their brothers had a rooted objection to Ida and her chatter. Angus thought her "a silly sort of girl, with altogether too much to say for herself"; Peter, three years younger (he was twelve), described her in a grown-up way characteristic of him, as "a sickening bore"; Bobby considered that she "showed off." So they generally kept out of the way when she was there, appearing often, upon the instant of her departure, with miraculous and comical suddenness, to take whatever share remained of the dainty eatables for which her coming was responsible.

"I feel," said Ida, after she had described in detail some of her elaborate plans for future happiness, "almost as if the whole big world had been given to me to do what I liked with."

"It must be a terribly responsible feeling," said Rene, pouring out her second cup of coffee.

At half-past ten, the rich, handsome, and devoted man who was shortly with so much worldly wealth to endow Ida, rang the door-bell, and escorted his prize away from the house.

When Shirley returned to the dining-room after seeing them off, she found her brothers there, disposing of the sandwiches that remained—Angus, a tall, wistful-eyed lad, who had lately secured a position for himself as “boy” in a city office; solemn-looking Peter, who bestowed much anxious thought upon the politics of his country, and held pronounced party opinions which he was prepared to defend with many a well-considered argument; Bobby, aged nine, and with a long record against him of orchards robbed from near and far, many of his most notorious raids having been made when the trees in his own home garden were weighed to the ground with ripe fruit.

“Don’t we all wish we were Ida!” Rene exclaimed, as Shirley entered. She spoke with such humorous gusto of longing, suggestive of Ida’s evident point of view, that the three girls had to succumb to the temptation of laughing at their departed visitor just a little, while Angus read the evening paper, and Peter extorted unwilling attention from Bobby while he stated his views upon the question which just now exercised his thoughts, this being whether

women, holding the positions of men absent on active service, should be paid the same salaries as the men had been receiving for the same work.

Nobody thought of going to bed, or of sending anyone else thither, although, what with the lateness of the hour, and Peter's extremely solid arguments, Bobby's eyelids were drooping, and he had almost ceased to dispute his brother's opinions—an attitude he generally adopted towards them, more on principle than because of contrary convictions.

Presently Mr. Kayle strayed in from the verandah. He was a spare, abstracted, dreary looking man, with a habit of addressing the members of his family indiscriminately by each other's names instead of their own, just as if names were merely family, and not fixed personal, properties. When they laughed at him, and set him right, he would declare peevishly that it all amounted to the same thing, anyhow; their names were so much alike, and he couldn't be expected to always hit upon the right one among so many.

"We might be a confused herd of phantoms about him, instead of six people with distinct and striking personalities, and his own children, too!" exclaimed Shirley one day, a little indignant, but mainly amused.

It was his way, and certainly one of his talents, to make a vague grievance out of

anything or nothing. Yet he was not an exacting man. He made no vigorous and insistent demand for reform when the house was more ill-managed or neglected than usual. In the matter of meals he was particularly long-suffering and uncomplaining. But when affairs went smoothly and well in the home, he was never stirred to any expression of encouraging approval.

He asked Rene for another cup of coffee; said he didn't mind, when she told him it was cold, shook his head at the proffered sandwiches, drank the coffee, made a grimace over it, bade them a general good-night; and went off to bed.

When the clock struck eleven, Shirley looked at Peter, and the now almost insensible Bobby, with a conscience-stricken air.

"You two ought to have been in bed hours ago," she said.

"Run along, boys," said Rene. "Eleven o'clock, Angus."

Peter had to shake Bobby to make him stand up, but he kept obdurately to his argument as they went away together.

"Mind you," he said at the door, "girls have to spend an awful lot of money on gloves and ribbons and things, you know, Bob, and men don't. There's that to be considered."

"'Tisn't," retorted Bobby, wholly confused now, but doggedly contradictory still.

"Oh dear, I'm too tired to move a limb," yawned Rene.

"So am I," said Shirley. "And who is going to clear these cups and things away?"

"We'll leave them till to-morrow," Phyllis answered decidedly.

And after sitting looking at the empty cups and making desultory remarks for another quarter of an hour, they went at last to bed.

But Shirley, waking up at two o'clock in the morning because a mosquito, on the wrong side of her nets, had swooped orchestrally down upon her face, was assailed by an uncalled-for recollection of those cups and saucers waiting in the dining-room to be faced when the new day began.

She thought how depressing they would look in the bright daylight, with a thin film of cream formed over the cold dregs in each cup, and how extremely disinclined she felt for the simple task of clearing them away before setting the table for breakfast.

She had determined, ere she went to bed, that on the morrow she would call everybody to partake of a daintily served meal, no later than eight o'clock. They had been falling into such lax ways in the matter of breakfast since the last maid had left. Peter and Bobby were permitted to indulge a whim for partaking of this meal on the back steps, and making it of bread and jam and iced biscuits—even cake, if there happened

to be any in the pantry; Mr. Kayle usually had a cup of tea in his room, and the others breakfasted, just when they were ready and inclined, in the kitchen.

But the desire for order and daintiness in her home tore persistently at Shirley's heart. She was always making good resolutions for effecting a change in the happy-go-lucky fashion in which the family lived. And she hated kitchen meals. In thought, now, she cleared away the coffee cups, and laid the table in all seemliness, with a bowl of dew-wet poppies in the middle. She felt a degree more tired than before when, in imagination, she had finished this task—and several degrees more wakeful and worried.

For she had just remembered the surgery—the disheartening surgery and the waiting-room, which called for early and thorough cleaning, if they were to be made ready for possible early patients.

If only charwomen were more easily procurable, and, when procured, more reliable! If only “generals” were not such expensive luxuries—or rather, necessities! As affairs stood now, there seemed no immediate prospect of being able to afford a maid. For Mr. Kayle grew more and more negligent in the practice of his profession, so that, with the imperfect management of his busy daughters, there was every month a less adequate sum in hand for household expenses.

It had been a terrible year since Myra, the eldest sister, had got married, and gone to live in Melbourne. Myra had somehow managed to keep a maid in the house nearly all the time she had been in charge of it—a wonderful achievement, Shirley realised afterwards, apart from the financial side of the question. They had had six different maids since then, and all had left of their own accord, some without even the formality of giving notice, though the Kayles were not so greatly surprised or very indignant over that.

“We’re such a big family,” they said, with pathetic humility, to each other, “and there aren’t nearly enough conveniences in the house to satisfy any modern general.”

The hall clock struck, aggravatingly, the half-hour, and Shirley wondered which half-past it was, or whether it was one o’clock, or only half-past twelve. For fear of waking Phyllis, she refrained from striking a light to look at her watch.

“It’s probably half-past three,” she thought bitterly, and pointed out to herself the extreme desirability, since she had to get up very early, of going to sleep at once.

Instead, she went on worrying about the problems of the household. She did not blame her sisters very much for their lack of interest. She was more inclined to deplore what they said was her fussiness, for she

admitted it was sometimes a little unreasonable. She wished, for her own sake, in view of the more than ever straitened circumstances in which they were now placed, that she had been born rather more of a comfortable Bohemian, like Rene.

"If only," she thought, with tears burning her eyes, "Mother had not been taken from us when we were such mites! If only Father hadn't lost interest! If only the money that used to be such a help hadn't stopped coming in! If only Phyllis were older, and more capable and domesticated! If only we had one nice, devoted kind of Aunt to live with us, and look after us, instead of all the wretched relations who find so much fault with us or turn us the cold shoulder because we are so poor! If only"—she gave a desperate little sob, and made an ineffectual attempt in the darkness to seize, and for ever silence, the mosquito which had once more flung itself upon her face—"if *only* I could go to sleep!"

She sobbed again.

On the other side of the room Phyllis sat up in bed.

"Is that you, Shirley?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Shirley, in a strangled voice.

"Are you *crying*?"

"Yes," said Shirley again, with a sob of demonstration.

Phyllis was beside her the next moment, anxiously demanding the reason of such untimely tears. And Shirley poured forth, in childish heartbroken fashion, her tale of the intruding mosquito, of her exceeding tiredness, of the stifling heat, and of her inability to sleep. Phyllis could be a very tender and motherly person at times.

She lit the gas, she brought eau-de-cologne and a fan, she routed, even destroyed, the offending mosquito—a deed in itself most soothing to the outraged feelings of its victim—she kissed and petted Shirley, shook up her pillow, brought her a drink of water, made a comforting joke or two, finally turned out the light, at Shirley's bidding, and retired to her own corner of the room.

A few minutes later it was Shirley who fell asleep, and an hour later it was Phyllis who still lay wakefully staring into the darkness, with wide, unhappy eyes.

CHAPTER IV

BAD LUCK

It was Shirley who rose, reluctantly, her eyes heavy with sleep, at twenty-nine minutes to six, screwed up her hair into a desperate-looking knot, ignored the pretty boudoir cap that hung on one of her bed-posts, dragged on her kimono, and went out, with an unelastic step, to the bathroom.

But after a cold shower, her bouyant spirit asserted itself suddenly, and she gave a breathless little laugh. It was an almost inaudible laugh, but it meant a good deal. It dismissed all the troubles of yesterday, and the discouraged tears of the night—it was her valiant greeting to the new day. Shirley invariably began her days with the cheerful interest and enthusiasm of one setting out upon an absorbing and pleasurable adventure.

As she dressed, she planned busily and eagerly, at one moment successes to be achieved and experiences gained, ere she grew old, at another all the work she was going to do before breakfast, while the others slept.

She unpinned that desperate-looking knot of hair, and arranged her shining tresses in a soft, pretty coil. She donned a frock of pale blue zephyr—a last summer's dress, and somewhat faded, but very pretty and fresh-looking, too. Whenever Shirley indulged in one of her whirlwind house-cleanings, she made a point of being perfectly spotless and dainty in her appearance to start off. It was a wonderful preventive against feeling a drudge.

As soon as she was dressed, she stole out to the garden, picked a ripe peach and ate it, looking about her, the while, at the pearly beauty of six o'clock in the morning, an hour in which, if one is awake, and the season is summer, and the day is bright, one is naturally inclined to make elaborate plans for the future, and lightly rate the trials of yesterday.

"It's strange to what depths of cowardice and depression you can sink in the middle of the night," she said to herself. "If you could only just convince yourself, at the time, that you'd feel quite different about it in the morning, after you had had your bath! I shall try to next time I wake up and get panicky over life."

She hurled her peach-stone gaily towards the sky, nodded brightly to the morning, and hurried off across the long, flower-interpersed grass to the house.

Two minutes later, enveloped in a big

apron, and with her sleeves rolled up above the elbows, she was down on her knees, briskly washing the surgery floor.

She turned a flushed little face at intervals towards the clock as the clean, wet space grew, and the dusty, dry space diminished. To lend interest to her work, and spur herself on to do it as quickly as possible, she had arranged a competition between herself and the clock hands, which necessitated great expedition on her part to bring her out victorious.

Yet Shirley won by a full minute. It was a big success.

She was breakfasting, in spite of her principles, and rather wearily, in the kitchen, when Phyllis entered, in a blue kimono and slippers, and demanded to know the hour of her sister's rising.

Shirley told her.

"I'm the smartest char-lady I've ever known," she said. "The surgery and the dining-room have been washed, and the surgery partly polished, between six o'clock and half-past seven. But I'll let you and Rene get breakfast for the family, Phyl. Give it to them in the dining-room, *please*. I'll make porridge for the boys if you will."

"All right," said Phyllis,—“that is, on condition that you've finished your foolish and unseemly toiling for the day. The idea of behaving in such a fashion! You, a Kayle,

and a brilliant violinist ! When a charwoman is not available, a clean sweep is quite sufficient for the house. But I might as well save my breath, I know."

Shirley agreed rather shortly, and began to mix the porridge, her hands fluttering a little in nervous haste. She dropped her spoon with a clatter that made her forehead crinkle, and scattered meal over the stove as well as in the saucepan. Then it struck her that everybody was very late getting up, and she rushed off, scolding a little, to call the boys.

When she returned to the kitchen, Rene was there, and Phyllis with her.

"Phyl has just been telling me what time you began your day, Shirley," Rene said to her, laughing. "What a ridiculous fidget you are over the floors ! It's funny how we've missed each other, though. I was out in the studio a bit before six—I got up early to do a little water-colour for Miss Starr to sell at a Red Cross fair. I took a cup of tea out with me, and had breakfast while I worked. Now I'm going back to finish my picture."

"Oh," said Phyllis, "then the kitchen will do for breakfast this morning, Shirley. It is only for me and the boys. I'll put some flowers on the table, if you like. But I do wish you were not such an awful fussier."

"You may have your meals in the woodshed, and feed off tin plates, and drink out of

jam-tins, for all I care!" Shirley declared, with sudden heat, and hurried away.

It irritated her to be called a fusser quite so often, she told herself, as she went back to the surgery. She said, "Oh dear," as she resumed her polishing, and "Oh dear," again presently, and sat still on the floor for about five minutes, thinking how bad all this housework was for her hands.

The surgery and the hall were immaculate when the first patient rang the door-bell an hour later, but Shirley was still busy in the waiting-room.

"If any other patients should come, you'll have to show them into the dining-room," she said to Phyllis. "The waiting-room won't be ready for about half an hour."

She was rubbing cream on the last patch of unpolished linoleum when the sound of the piano came to her ears, played by two fingers of an unknown pair of hands. And the air which the two fingers played was that simple melody with which are associated the famous lines :

"There is no luck about the house,
There is no luck at all!"

"Now who can be doing that?" Shirley exclaimed.

The performance was repeated, and Shirley went out to the kitchen, and referred her question to Phyllis, with some heat.

"A patient," answered Phyllis. "He's a soldier—a returned one, I think."

"Well, the last fact might excuse him if anything could," remarked Shirley. "The first certainly does not. It's appalling impudence, anyhow."

She returned to the waiting-room, duster in hand, and began to tiptoe about the floor, setting the place in order.

And the soldier in the dining-room went on groping, with two fingers, for his tune.

"The superlative cheek of him!" said Shirley to herself. "To come into anyone's house on business, and take such liberties! He'll be going out to the kitchen and making himself a cup of tea next! I shouldn't be at all surprised. . . . The *outrageous* impudence!"

"There *is* no luck about the house——"

It had begun again, after a brief silence. The player accented the phrase as if he meant it—as indeed he did.

Each moment that passed saw Shirley more exasperated than the moment before. Presently she made a portentous declaration, in a voice of ominous calm.

"I can bear that just once again," she said. "But I warn you, only once—soldier or no soldier, whether you've been wounded at the War or not."

It has been shown that Shirley was a rather tempestuous little person, whose indignation, when aroused, was as stormy as it was short-lived.

At another time, it is probable that the unmusical performance by the stranger in the next room would have appealed merely to her risible faculties, but she was more tired than she realised, and her nerves were very much on edge, so that the feeble strumming struck her as a more heinous offence every moment, and roused her to a corresponding pitch of indignation against the offender.

Just once more she heard him out, even as she had said, and then, without any further hesitation, made for the door.

She marched down the hall, flung open the door of the dining-room, and entered.

The soldier looked round, startled, sprang to his feet, and faced her.

"Good-morning," said Shirley, in a tone of unmistakable severity. "Would you mind *not* playing any more?"

"I—oh, I say, I'm very sorry," said the soldier. "Is anyone ill in the house? It never occurred to me that there might be."

He was a tall young sergeant, with earnest grey eyes, and a few smile lines graven about them. His brown, refined face had flushed at her sudden entrance, and his expression was one of great concern as he made his apology.

But did he really imagine his preposterous strumming could annoy no one save an invalid?

"There's no one actually ill—yet," said Shirley, and she smiled pleasantly. "I—er—haven't let it go on long enough for that."

He looked with some amusement, and a hint of embarrassment, at the candid young person before him.

"I'm very sorry," he repeated contritely. "But I was a bit desperate, you see. I was in an awful funk at the prospect of having a tooth extracted, and couldn't find a magazine or anything here to take my mind off it, so I *had* to begin playing the piano to keep myself from cutting out of the house by the back way."

She laughed at that.

"I don't think Father will keep you waiting much longer," she said, "but I'll get you a magazine to help you through the *funks*."

She brought him one, and returned to the waiting-room.

But the soldier did not open that magazine. He put it down on the table, and sat staring at it unhappily.

Well, how about his luck now? He had seen her, spoken to her, but only at the expense of making himself ridiculous in her eyes. He could not quite understand now why he had given way to the spirit of humorous recklessness which had prompted him,

a few minutes before, to vent and express his disappointment in such an absurd fashion.

He had chosen to consult Mr. Kayle for the sole reason that the exquisite little violinist he had heard—and watched—play at Fall's was that dentist's daughter. He had thought there might be a possible chance of a patient catching a glimpse of her in her father's house, hearing her voice, even speaking to her, as it had been vouchsafed to him to speak to her younger sister, about the weather, when she had opened the door to him to-day. Why couldn't it have been the little violinist who had opened the door? He had made his appointment for the morning purposely, thinking there was a chance of her being at home then. This was his third visit to the house, and he had not seen her once until she had darted into his presence, a few minutes ago, to protest against his strumming on her piano.

Certainly there was no luck about the house for him.

Half an hour afterwards Adam Deering left the house.

"I was most horribly disagreeable to that man," Shirley reflected, watching him go, from the window of the waiting-room. "I'm sure I hurt his feelings. He's a soldier, too, and has had *his* nerves pretty badly jarred at the War without getting bad-tempered, I expect. And he has a nice face, quite

different from the type I was expecting to see when I dashed in there to settle him. What a nasty, snappy, snarly kind of girl I am ! And I was quite an amiable person at six o'clock this morning ! ”

CHAPTER V

SECRET INFORMATION

AT a short distance from the street in which Bushy Lodge, the Kayles' home, was situated, lived those two little girls, Nancy and Chris Russell, whose hearts were at this time so full of compassion for Adam Deering.

Mingled with this emotion was a feeling of strong indignation against Ida Kenning, their music-teacher.

So great was their displeasure with Miss Kenning that, when a notification had come by post from Lila Gray, another of her pupils, to the effect that subscriptions would be received by the latter towards the purchase of a wedding present for Miss Kenning, Nancy had dramatically torn the letter into fragments. Both had assured each other that they would not be represented by so much as a halfpenny in the token of esteem and good wishes that was to be handed to Miss Kenning on behalf of her pupils at their concert a week before Christmas.

As for Mr. Gordon Hartridge, the wealthy

man whom Miss Kenning was to marry early in the new year, they were not personally acquainted with that gentleman, but Chris remarked, with a grim face, that she wished him all the happiness he deserved; and Nancy said that if at any time Mr. Hartridge should take to drink, and to beating his wife, well, Mrs. Hartridge need not come to her for sympathy.

Yet it was only a few months ago that Nancy and Chris had considered Miss Kenning "absolutely sweet," had raved over her "glorious" brown eyes, her "wonderful" hair, and the "bewitching" way she did it. They had thought her manner "fascinating," and had been utterly "dazzled" by her smile.

They acknowledged her beauty still, but they said her expression was heartless and cold—even cruel, at times—her smile quite insincere. They told each other that such shallow beauty as Miss Kenning's had no longer any attraction for them.

This change in their feelings towards Ida had been wrought by the confidences of a little chatterbox, Ida's sister, who attended "Seaview College," as they did themselves; sat next to Nancy in class, and made her the repository of every "secret" that came her way.

Rita Kenning loved telling romantic secrets to Nancy—she was always so deeply inter-

ested, and so ready and able to invest them with the colours of her own bright fancy, and make them thrilling and beautiful secrets indeed to guard.

Rita's statements were not always strictly veracious, for she was inclined to be very sure of the truth of her own surmises, and after confiding these to anyone—especially to Nancy—as facts, they would rapidly develop such strength of conviction in her own mind, that she would have been almost ready to swear to the absolute accuracy of them.

It was over eighteen months now since Rita had said to Nancy one day :

“Adam Deering, my cousin, is always at our place now, playing tennis, and he hardly ever used to come. Shouldn't be surprised if he has fallen in love with Ida. Nearly all the men do who come to our place, you know. She's had about a hundred proposals already.” A statement which Nancy was quite ready to credit, and so also was Chris, to whom Nancy, by Rita's special permission, repeated these romantic conjectures.

As has already been intimated, they were not personally acquainted with Adam, though they knew him well by sight, and considered him about the handsomest man in the world.

He was the only son of Doctor Deering, a widower, who lived near to them, a very gruff-looking old fellow, whose frowning

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face, with its bushy eyebrows, overhanging a pair of piercing dark eyes, had inspired Nancy and Chris with such awe that they would almost as soon have walked up to an unmuzzled lion and patted its head, as they would have accosted Doctor Deering in the street, and asked to be told the time.

Adam had been among the first to enlist when the War broke out, and then, more than ever, was he a splendid personage in the eyes of Nancy and Chris, and of Rita Kenning too, who, just at that time, preferred him to any of her family's men friends.

"But Ida's dreadfully miserable about it," she confided to Nancy one day; "she has hardly eaten a thing for about a week, and last night I went into her room, and she was there crying like anything. She was mad with me for going in, but when I asked her what was the matter, and was it about Adam going to the War, she said, 'Yes, that's it!'"

One Monday morning Rita came to school in a high state of excitement.

"They're engaged, but it's to be kept a secret," she announced to Nancy, at the first opportunity. "Adam proposed on Saturday. He came over from Camp to tennis, and stayed to dinner—he was the only visitor who did stay. After dinner they both wandered off by themselves out to the garden. I didn't spy on them, but

I just went a little way and saw them talking awfully earnestly. They stayed out there about an hour, and it was pretty cold, too, in the wind, but *they* wouldn't notice that, of course."

"Of course not," agreed Nancy.

"Adam left pretty soon afterwards, and Ida went straight to her room," continued Rita, "and I ran up there to see if she'd tell me. She had been crying again, and when I asked her was she awfully miserable, she said, 'No, she was quite happy now,' and I said I knew all about it, 'cause I wasn't *quite* so blind as she thought me. She looked rather scared at that, the silly, so I said I'd been noticing things, and I'd seen her and Adam talking very earnestly in the garden, and I knew it wasn't all about the weather. And I said I didn't mind her being in love with Adam, though I knew Mother wouldn't like it, 'cause she can't stand his father."

"He does look very scotty," said Nancy.

"So when she saw it was no use trying to hide things from me any longer, she laughed and said I could think what I liked about it, but it was a great secret, and she wouldn't tell me a thing, and I wasn't to tell a soul about what I'd noticed, and then she gave me six chocolates, and a bit of lovely pink ribbon."

A few months later, Adam was fighting at Gallipoli, and sending Ida frequent letters

and field-service cards. And Ida wrote often to Adam, and posted him a good many pairs of socks, and cakes of soap and chocolate, as Rita could testify.

Yet, despite all this circumstantial evidence, Ida and Adam were not engaged, secretly or otherwise.

Those tears and troubled looks which had seemed to confirm the children's original romantic suspicion, were merely the result of Ida having got into debt to an alarming extent, through playing Bridge for high stakes.

That long, earnest talk between Ida and Adam in the garden, which had so much further misled her small sister, was to be explained by the fact that Ida had eventually given her cousin—not her hand and heart, which would have embarrassed him—but her confidence. Adam had been very sympathetic. He had readily consented to help Ida out of her difficulty (she did not have sufficient courage to face her parents' anger by confession), and had given her some wise counsel regarding the folly of such pleasures as had infatuated her of late. And Ida, moved to tears, had, unsolicited, made him a solemn promise that hereafter she would entirely abstain from them.

It was during the midwinter holidays, and before Adam's return to Australia (he had been invalided home for six months),

that Ida became engaged to Gordon Hart-ridge.

Rita brought the news to Nancy and Chris when school reopened, with even more excitement and delight than she had evinced over the fancied engagement between her sister and Adam Deering.

"But," cried Nancy, aghast, "she can't, Rita—she can't marry anyone but Mr. Deering."

"Pooh!" said Rita. "Adam isn't the only person Ida has been engaged to, and changed her mind. I thought it wouldn't come to anything, somehow. Gordon Hart-ridge has thousands and thousands and thousands of pounds. And they are to be married next January, and I'm going to be a bridesmaid, and choose whatever I like for a present."

That day it became known amongst the small "Seaview" girls that Nancy and Chris Russell were "not speaking" to Rita Kenning. It was the beginning of one of the longest estrangements between girls that had ever been known at "Seaview."

Adam's old friendly intimacy with the Kennings was not resumed upon his return. He went once to see them, when Ida, in his hearing, airily discussed her various losses and gains at several recent Bridge parties, which proved that the tearful, earnest promise she had offered him, less than a

year ago, was now a memory of no account to her.

He had made a dry little observation, calculated, perhaps, to remind her of it, which she had understood, and very angrily resented. So Adam's visits to his cousin's house had ceased entirely, and Ida only bowed aloofly to him when she happened to meet him in the street or elsewhere.

Three of his six months' leave had passed, and Adam, having made a rapid return to health, had gone into camp for the remaining three, and was ready to sail for the Front upon any day decreed by the authorities. And the hearts of those two school-girls, to whom he had never given a thought in his life, were much disturbed on his behalf by feelings of sorrow and apprehension.

There is a song of a French soldier, returning from battle, hungry and footsore, ragged and gay, marching homeward with his regiment, to claim his bride. But when he reaches the home village, he finds his sweetheart married to another, to the rich farmer who had bought her. And with the savage despair of a broken heart, he utters the only cry that fills it now: "Bataille! Bataille! Bataille!" And so, footsore and ragged, reckless and stern, away he marches again with his regiment, away he marches to battle—and what further happens to him the song does not tell, but one is at liberty to guess.

Nancy and Chris knew this song; with their friend, Mrs. Chester, they had heard the French-Canadian tenor, Paul Dufault, sing it at one of his afternoon concerts in the Sydney Town Hall, had heard him tell the story first, in clear, unrhymed English, so that all might understand the burden of the song.

And now they compared the story with that of this Australian soldier, who, like the Frenchman, finding his loved one stolen during his absence, as they believed, had impatiently cut short the time given him for rest and recovery, in order to hurry forth again to Battle! Battle! Battle!

One afternoon, Simon Green, the man who worked three days a week in their garden, and the remaining three in Doctor Deering's, remarked conversationally to the two, as they stood watching him trim the front hedge: "I met young Deering this morning, on 'is way home. 'E's on final leave, 'e tells me—expects to git away again some time next week. It's only a fortnight or so since 'e went back to camp, but there was a gap to fill, and it was offered to 'im, and you bet 'e jumped into it."

A few minutes afterwards, in another part of the garden, the little girls voiced to each other at last the fear that had disturbed their minds since Adam had returned to camp.

"Chris," said Nancy, "it's my firm belief

that—that he doesn't intend to come out of this war again alive ! ”

“ I b'lieve he'll try to get shot,” responded Chris, in unhappy agreement with her sister.

“ He'll go away feeling so dreadfully lonely ! ” said Nancy.

“ No one belonging to him except that scotty old doctor ! ” said Chris.

“ And with his faith in women completely *shattered* ! ” declared Nancy, with an impressive and dramatic gesture. Very wise in the phrases of love fiction was Nancy for her twelve years.

“ What else could you expect ? ” demanded Chris.

“ You've only to look at his face to see what a bitter cynic he has become ! ” resumed Nancy, who had an imagination that could accomplish anything. And Chris agreed with her.

“ Have you noticed the expression of utter weariness, and reckless despair, deep in his eyes, Chris ? ” asked Nancy.

“ Rather ! ” answered Chris. “ Anybody could see that.”

“ And yet, in spite of it, they're letting him go straight back to the Front ! ” exclaimed Nancy. “ It just proves what an awful hurry he's in to face the murderous guns once more, 'cause Simon said his father badly wanted him to go into an officers' school and get a commission before he went away again.”

"Well," said Chris fiercely, "I hope she'll be happy when she hears of how he lay bleeding on the ground——"

"Don't, Chris!" cried Nancy.

"Dying in agony with her name upon his lips!" finished Chris, as mercilessly as if she were flinging the words, not at Nancy, but at the future Mrs. Gordon Hartridge.

Nancy couldn't bear it; she burst into tears.

"Oh, if there were only something—anything, that *we* could do!" she exclaimed—"something to cheer him up, and comfort him, and—restore his faith in women!"

"If only we could!" said Chris.

There was a silence, which Nancy broke at last, in an altered voice—eager, happy, and determined.

"We've got to, then, that's all!" she said. "We've just *got* to do something to cheer him up, and help him, after he goes away!"

"But what could we do?" demanded Chris dubiously.

"We'll write and tell Mr. Chester about him, for *one* thing!" said Nancy, making her plans as she went along. "We'll ask him to keep his eye on Adam Deering as much as possible over there. Mr. Chester will be able to cheer him up, if anyone can. But we'll have to do our part too, of course. We'll—we'll write to him, Chris, by every

mail. We'll pour balm on his broken heart, and heal his wound at last—you and me!"

Nancy's tone was full of an exalted kind of excitement. Her blue eyes flashed with the fire of splendid purpose.

"But he doesn't know us," objected Chris. "He's never recognised us in any way, when we've passed him in the street."

"That's nothing!" retorted Nancy—"nothing at all. How do you know he wasn't wishing like anything for an introduction? It's no use, Chris, we've got to do this thing, we've simply *got* to."

So Chris demurred no more, but accepted her share of the responsibility, with blind faith in her sister's ability to carry out the plan, realising simply, and without dismay, that "they *had* to!"

CHAPTER VI

WORSE LUCK

THE road which Bushy Lodge faced was being tarred.

It had been a very disheartening road until now, with an apparently inexhaustible supply of fine dust piled up near the footpaths, in readiness to fling through the open windows and doorways of the houses on either side, at the slightest provocation from passing vehicles, or winds that blew.

"We shan't get half so much dust in the house now," Shirley observed hopefully, as she rubbed linoleum cream on the waiting-room floor, pausing for a moment to sniff appreciatively the pungent odour that came from further up the street.

An extremely supercilious relation had rung up that morning and astonished the Kayles by making an appointment to have her teeth attended to by Mr. Kayle on the following day, and the intelligence had literally brought Shirley to her knees upon the floors of the two professional rooms.

"If she's coming here with the hope of

finding reason for spreading around, among the other relations, what a terribly neglectful and neglected family we are, as she did before," said Shirley, "well, she's going to be grievously disappointed, that's all. And there's a good mirror to reflect your disappointed countenance in, Cousin Olivia," she finished, with an extra vigorous rub upon the floor.

But when she reached home that evening her satisfaction was swiftly changed to wrathful mourning.

Phyllis told the story with deep feeling. She was full of compassion for Shirley in her dismay:

"It was all spotless until four o'clock," she said, "but at that evil hour, a woman with three chins, and four children, came. She was wiping her own boots on the mat, and scolding the children hard, when I opened the door to them, so of course I didn't dream of questioning the state of *their* shoes. And I think, Shirley, my poor darling, that they must have come straight across the tar, further up the street, instead of over the dry part."

"Oh, I think they must have!" wailed Shirley.

"The four children played noisily in the waiting-room while the chinny one sat upon the surgery throne," proceeded Phyllis. "When she went back to them, she scolded the small, rude girl with the straight ginger

hair, for having made the large boy with the long curls cry. Father let them all out of the house, but he says he didn't hear the woman say one word to the children about the wreck they had made of the polished floor, Shirley, and I didn't enter the room myself until half an hour ago. There are not many marks on the hall to betray the horrors in here, you see."

"I shall just have to do it again, that's all," said Shirley, in a voice of pathetic resignation. "It will take hot, soapy water and the scrubbing brush, I think," she added, brokenly.

Phyllis was deeply touched.

"I'll do it myself, to-morrow morning," she announced, in a magnificent tone.

"Will you polish it, though?" asked Shirley anxiously. "If only you would, Phyl!"

"I shall get the tar off," promised Phyllis. "If Cousin Olivia desires polish, I shall show her where the cream is kept, and of course I can explain about the chinny woman and her children, and the shine that *was*."

"And she'll sniff!" said Shirley. "Because things like that are done every day in properly kept homes."

"If she sniffs at me I'll sneeze at her!" retorted Phyllis passionately. "No, Shirley, I refuse to be a sweated slave to *any* floor, not to the most palatial floor on earth. The

tar shall be removed, but that's all, and I think it's noble of me to do so much, instead of merely explaining about the dilemma we are in without a maid. Cousin Olivia wouldn't do servant's work for any consideration on earth!"

Shirley ceased to argue the point, but the next day the breakfast-hour found the waiting-room speckless, its floor a brown mirror, its vases, and those of the surgery, filled with pink tea-roses, the few black footmarks that had marred the hall removed, and its polish undisturbed by any dull patches.

Phyllis washed her hands of her sister in dramatic language; Rene laughed, and said Shirley was a most incorrigible fidget, and Shirley, dismissing the topic with an air of cheerful satisfaction, began to talk of the new pupils, and the extra guineas that were to be hers, at Ida's recommendation, in the New Year, when the latter's teaching career would be closed.

At ten o'clock Shirley was giving a music-lesson in the dining-room. At five minutes after ten came Adam Deering, to keep an appointment with Mr. Kayle, on this last day of his final leave from camp.

Adam was deeply abstracted as he walked along the street. He was thinking of the Great Turmoil to which he was so soon returning, and of himself, and of Shirley Kayle.

It was strange how much he had thought of

Shirley since that day a month after his return home, when he had chanced to drop into Fall's Tea Room with another soldier friend. He had been often to Fall's since then, and always for the purpose, until lately unconfessed to himself, of watching and hearing the little violinist with the eager blue eyes, and the vividly expressive face, whose playing, curiously imbued with the personality of the player, thrilled and fascinated him more than music had ever had power to do before.

He was really very much surprised at himself for his weakness. In frequent moments of late, he had remonstrated with himself. He had never "bothered about" girls before, had imagined himself one of the most level-headed and unsusceptible fellows in existence. And now, to have got into such a state of mind—or heart—over a girl he didn't know! It was preposterous that he should have *fallen in love* at his age (he was twenty-eight) in just such an unreasonable, impractical fashion as a boy of eighteen might have done.

But then—but then, it wasn't as if it were any ordinary girl, with whom, at mere sight and hearing, he had become infatuated. In self-justification, he would recall Shirley's face, the characteristic gestures that had become familiar and dear to him, her sudden smile, the conquering poise of her head when

she played, the essential, manifold differences that separated her from, and placed her above, all the other girls in the world.

He did not suppose any such fortunate chance as seeing her this morning would befall. There was *no* luck about that house for him, as he had already proved.

But all the same, he was going there almost half an hour before the appointed time, just in case luck—and Shirley—happened to be in the front of the house, to be caught unawares, before the luckless hour of his appointment struck.

Another fellow would have contrived to get introduced, and properly acquainted with her, before now, he told himself, as he went along. But in two months he had got no further than gazing at her in Fall's Tea Room, like the helpless, unresourceful block-head that he was—except that he had acted the clown on her piano, and thus attracted her indignant and scornful notice to himself.

Now he was going away—back to the War, and the best place for him! He was much too slow, anywhere else!

"What a wonderful thing it would be," he thought, "for a fellow, away at the War, to be getting letters from Shirley Kayle!"

He wondered whether there were a fellow over there—a sociable, good-looking fellow—one who *had* bothered about girls all his life, and knew how to make himself attractive to

them—who received letters from Shirley Kayle, letters with that magic personality of hers flashing through them, as it flashed through her music, letters with her love at the end—her *best* love.

Unfortunately, as it turned out, Adam had reached this disturbing stage in his reflections when he found himself exactly opposite the gate of Bushy Lodge. In his abstraction he might have gone past the house, but the three brass plates—they were very bright to-day—happened to catch his eyes, and reminded him that it was time to cross the road. And forthwith he crossed it.

It was a bitter thought, that of the good-looking fellow over there—to whom Shirley Kayle might be writing letters, with an endearing prefix and a loving signature—such a bitter thought that it rendered him oblivious to the liquid state of the tar, which had only just been laid upon this end of the road, and he strode across it as heavily as though he were indulging himself (as perhaps he was) in the enjoyable pretence of crushing the presumptuous fellow and his aspirations underfoot.

There was a notice hanging on the door-knob, which Phyllis had printed and placed there. It bore the inscription :

“ PLEASE WIPE YOUR BOOTS ”

and the printing was large.

But Adam, though he looked at it earnestly, and, in a vague way, admired the beauty of the capital W, failed to take in the import of the words, and though it was his custom to wipe his boots without any telling before entering private houses, he failed to do so on this occasion.

His usually self-possessed brain was in a delirious whirl of wondering whether—whether, by some remote chance, or some special dispensation of a kindly Fate—*she* would answer the door. It meant a lot to him, you see, such a *jolly* lot, he was assuring Fate, earnestly, as he stood there. If she didn't open the door, he might never see her again, for he was returning to camp that night. If she did open the door, she *must* speak to him, though it were only to say: "Go into the waiting-room, please!"

The door opened, and Mr. Kayle stood within, eyeing him regretfully.

"Good-morning," said the dentist. "I'm extremely busy this morning. Let me see—did you have an appointment?"

"For half-past ten," retorted Adam, regarding Shirley's father with disfavour.

Mr. Kayle glanced at his watch, and sighed.

"I remember now," he said. "Just step into the waiting-room, will you? I shan't keep you long."

Adam stepped in—over the shining hall, and over the shining surface of the room

beyond, to reach the chair that most appealed to him. It proved too low for comfort, and he chose another, on the other side of the room. Then he went to the table, and picked up a magazine.

Five minutes later, Mr. Kayle summoned him to the surgery, and, fifteen minutes later still, he was left sitting in the dental chair, while Mr. Kayle went out to his workshop, to prepare an inlay filling for immediate application.

The stumbling music performed by Shirley's pupil ceased while he waited. In deep bitterness of spirit, Adam heard teacher and pupil pass the closed door of the surgery, and *her* voice bidding the pupil good-bye.

And then there followed an exclamation of dismay, *her* voice calling urgently, "Phyllis!"—footsteps up the hall, and another voice, which he judged to be Phyllis's, demanding what the matter was.

"Look!" said *she*. "And now look in there!"

A gasp of dismay came from Phyllis this time, and then a startling denunciation.

"It must have been that abominable soldier—Deering his name is—the one who strummed on the piano you know, Shirley. He was here a while ago, and Father gave him about ten minutes, and then sent him off. Shirley, he must be a hateful man! To deliberately mess his boots up with tar, and

then ramp about on polished floors for spite ! You can't tell me it wasn't done on purpose ! ”

“ To think that I've polished it twice in two days, and after all that slavery, *still* I'm foiled ! ” said the despairing voice of Shirley.

“ Well,” said Phyllis, “ I don't like to crow; but it would have been better to have taken my advice, wouldn't it ? Let this be a lesson to you. And cheer up, my love. I see the hand of Fate in the footprints of that horrid soldier. The floor was ordained to be tar-marked when Cousin Olivia arrived. Come and have a cup of tea before you go. It's all ready on the back verandah.”

Footsteps died away down the hall. Adam sat stiffly still in the red velvet dental chair for a few moments, and then mopped his brow. What awful thing was this he had done ? He gingerly turned up the soles of his boots for inspection. Yes, certainly they had passed over a tarred surface. He noticed, now, that the floor of the room in which he sat bore horrid witness to the fact. He got off the chair, stole on tip-toe to the window, and looked out. Beyond a doubt the road was smothered with fresh tar, and he had walked across it, and afterwards, without wiping his boots, evidently, he had—what was it?—*ramped about* on a floor which *she* had slaved, for two days in succession, to polish. He collected his thoughts sufficiently to state

the case to himself, but with difficulty. His very soul sickened at the enormity of his crime! Especially as it shocked him to think of *her* having any dealing with floors save the necessary one of walking upon them.

A morbid desire came to him to look at the floor upon which he had ramped. There was no other patient in the waiting-room, he knew, and he was sure he had heard the girls retire to the back of the house. When he had collected his thoughts sufficiently, he hoped she would return, and give him an opportunity of apologising and explaining. He must ask to be allowed to do so. . . . But, good heavens, he had no explanation to offer!

He inspected the soles of his boots again. To save himself from further iniquity, he must take them off; he would have to take them out to the verandah to get into them again!

It was confoundedly awkward, having to get undressed like this, here, he told himself distractedly, as he unwound his puttees, and hauled off his boots. He stood them, soles uppermost, on the hearth, crept out of the room, across the hall, and into the room beyond.

His heart seemed to lurch against his side the next moment, for there, upon the floor she had polished, the floor he had ramped

upon, she sat, a frail little figure, her face buried in her hands. She was sobbing—sobbing, in a heart-broken way indeed.

He had made her cry !

He took an uncertain step forward, and moved dry lips, in an effort to speak—what to say he did not know, but his tongue refused to move, and she remained heedless of his presence, and sobbed on.

“The—great—big—lout !” she said presently, between her sobs.

And then involuntarily speech and action came to him.

“Don’t cry !” he said. “For pity’s sake, don’t cry !”

He went down on his knees upon the floor, pulled out his khaki handkerchief, and began to rub the tar-marks with it, disastrously for the handkerchief, and without any visible improvement to the floor.

She raised her head with a jerk, and stared at him, wet-eyed and horror-stricken.

For five seconds they gazed at each other thus, and then she, too, forced her lips to difficult speech.

“G—go away !” she said.

“I’m confoundedly sorry !” he muttered. “I don’t know how I came to do it, but I swear it wasn’t on purpose ! You must let me clean it up !”

And then by a supreme effort Shirley drew all her dignity to her aid.

She stood up.

"Please don't mind," she said coldly. "I assure you it doesn't matter in the least. It will be no trouble whatever to remedy that trifling damage. You mustn't mind what I said. I—it—I mean—it doesn't matter in the least."

She gave him a funny little dignified bow, a queer little shaky smile, and passed out of the room, with her head held high.

A few days later Adam Deering sailed away, bound for the other side of the world, where the fortunes of the Great War ebbed and flowed, and the cry in the hearts of hundreds of thousands of strong, fierce men was "Battle! Battle! Battle!"

CHAPTER VII

FAMILY SYMPATHY

It was a very distressed and reproachful Shirley indeed who, having beaten as dignified a retreat as possible from the waiting-room and Adam, went out to the verandah, where Phyllis had morning tea and biscuits ready.

"You told me he had gone!" Shirley moaned. "Oh, you told me he had gone!"

She fell upon the nearest chair, and rocked herself to and fro, in an access of wretchedness.

"And he hadn't," she finished, in eloquent demonstration of the cause.

"You mean to say——?" began Phyllis.

"I mean to say," retorted Shirley, "that he was in the surgery all the time we were abusing him just outside the door, and that he has just been looking at an interesting exhibition of *me*, all in a heap on the waiting-room floor—crying! He heard me call him a *great big lout*!"

"So he is, anyhow," said Phyllis.

"Deering, you said his name was, too," moaned Shirley. "I suppose he's Adam

Deering, Ida's cousin. Oh, I hope he never tells her! I don't think I'll ever outlive the horror of discovering him kneeling there on the floor opposite me, telling me 'not to cry,' and rubbing at the tar-marks with his hanky."

"A painful situation to carry in remembrance, I admit," agreed Rene. "Poor little Shirley! Life holds its consolations, though, as well as its bitterness." She eyed the brown tea-pot lovingly. "Drink your tea," she advised.

But Shirley, glancing at her watch, discovered that she had barely a moment left in which to don her hat and powder her tear-stained face, before rushing off to keep an appointment in the city.

"I'll have to go out by the back gate, too," she cried distractedly, "though it's a longer way round to the tram. But I daren't run the risk of meeting him. Oh, get my hat and my bag, Phyl."

She rushed to the dining-room for her violin and music, and the next minute was flying off through the garden.

"I can hear the tram coming," she called despairingly, as she ran.

When she reached home in the evening, very tired and limp, Phyllis met her at the gate, smiling.

"You needn't worry about the chance of encountering him for a while," she said, by

way of greeting, "because he is sailing for the Front again next week. My dear, however he came to do it remains a mystery—even to himself, I think, for he was terribly distressed. Fancy him taking his boots off—and he wouldn't put them on again till he got outside."

Shirley's face was deeply unhappy as she listened.

"I couldn't think of anything else all day," she said. "I'm so frightfully miserable and ashamed. How uncomfortable we must have made him feel! He must think us odious girls, Phyl, to say the things we did!"

"Great—big—lout!" quoted Phyllis, laughing.

"Don't!" cried Shirley, and shuddered.

Phyllis put an arm around her waist, and hurried her through the hall to their room.

"You haven't asked me anything about Cousin Olivia yet," she reminded Shirley, as they entered it together.

"Oh, I'd forgotten her for the moment," answered Shirley. "Was she horribly patronising, and obviously disapproving?"

"She rang up, just after you left," answered Phyllis, "and had her appointment altered to to-morrow afternoon."

Shirley looked relieved.

"Oh, then there'll be time, after all," she murmured, "to make things right before she comes."

"Do you propose," Phyllis demanded; "to offer up yet one more—er—steamed sacrifice to Cousin Olivia's superciliousness?"

"I suppose so," answered Shirley wearily, "but don't talk about floors to-night, Phyl, will you? The subject makes me feel sick."

"Why don't you tell her, and have done with it?" exclaimed Peter suddenly, from the doorway where, unnoticed, he had been standing since her entrance, on the tip-toe of impatient expectancy.

Whereupon, a wondering Shirley was called upon to follow a procession of brothers and sisters to the waiting-room, and allowed to make happy discovery of a floor devoid of tar blemishes, and with an unbroken, glassy surface. The surgery floor was the same, and Adam's footprints in the hall were likewise effaced.

"Who did it?" she exclaimed gratefully.

"It's a case of 'Who killed Cock Robin?'" said Phyllis gaily. "'Twas I, my love, for I got the tar off. I was too busy ironing to polish before four o'clock, and then the boys came home from school and——"

"I said *we'd* do it," said Bobby, "so——"

"I went to Fitchett's for a fresh tin of stuff," put in Peter. "You'd finished up the other tin, Shirley."

"'Twas I who opened it when he got home," came from Rene. "And then Peter did the waiting-room, and Bobby the surgery."

"*And* the hall, if you please," added Bobby. "I was on to that before Peter had half finished his room. He had a bit too much to say about Conscription to get along very fast."

"Rot," said Peter haughtily. "There were only two little patches in the surgery, between the door and the chair, for you to do—some of his steps hadn't made any mark at all, 'cause the worst of the tar was off his boots before he got in there. But he seemed to have tracked all round the waiting-room."

"*Ramped* was how I put it myself," murmured Phyllis. "And now let's dine," she went on. "The floors and the ironing have kept me so busy, Shirley dear, I have to ask you to put up with a cold meal this evening."

Shirley, in her gratitude, said she wanted nothing better, and went out to the dining-room, prepared to eat saladless corned beef from the ham-shop, with contentment.

But what a feast met her eyes, spread upon the flower-decked table! What an artistically decorated feast, of ham and tongue, elaborate salad, asparagus, trifle, bristling with spiky split almonds, and beautified by thousands of hundreds and thousands, dishes of choice fruit, a chocolate-iced cake, with cream and chopped walnuts between. The cutlery shone brilliantly, so did the elegant old silver dishes which were seldom brought

out now, because their use involved extra time and trouble.

"Is anyone coming to dinner?" asked Shirley, amazedly.

"No," answered Rene, "but your pathos to-day was unendurable without an unnatural outburst of the sort. I could have stood all else, but your having to go without your tea this morning settled me."

"The cake and the trifle and fruit are Rene's shout," said Phyllis, "and Angus bought the asparagus. I rang him up in the lunch-hour, and told him of the tar and tears of this morning."

"You darlings!" Shirley exclaimed. She seized upon and kissed them each in turn—she was so deeply touched and appreciative.

Mr. Kayle came in, glanced over the table, and sat down, without comment.

"Father!" exclaimed Rene, in a tone of vast reproach. "You haven't wished me 'Many happy returns!'"

"Eh?" he said. "Your birthday, is it? So many of you, can't keep all these blessed dates in my head. Um—many happy returns, by all means."

"Do you remember how old she is, Father?" asked Shirley.

He didn't, and said so—a little peevish at the prospect of cross-examination from them all, and their subsequent laughter over his vagueness. He ate his share of the pleasant

meal with his usual abstracted air, and took no part in the flow of merry talk that went round the table. He rose when he had finished, and drifted outside, pipe in hand, and they scarcely noticed his going, for it was his usual way.

Rene and Phyllis insisted on washing up afterwards, unassisted by Shirley, with the boys to clear the table.

"Just once in a way," Rene said, "it pays to be pathetic. Our hearts are touched to the final extent of leaving you reclining at ease on the verandah, while we do all that's required in the kitchen. You entertain her, Angus."

It was in vain for Shirley to protest. They were determined to have their own way. Rene arranged the laughing pathetic one on the wicker verandah lounge, with as much artistic care, Phyllis said, as she had taken over the trifle, pushed and pulled Angus into an easy attitude by the central post, surveyed the effect of them for a moment, with her head on one side, pronounced it "very nice," and hurried away.

Shirley gave a happy little sigh.

"What a lovely finish to a wretched day!" she said.

Angus was silent, his wistful eyes looking away beyond the orchard trees to the hot western sky, then returning suddenly, with something startling in their directness, to Shirley on the lounge.

"It ought to be like this every day," he remarked.

Shirley opened her eyes very wide.

"Me a pampered loafer like this?" she queried.

"Yes, certainly, when you've been slaving all day!" he answered.

"But that wouldn't be fair to the others," Shirley exclaimed indignantly. "Rene, too, is simply slaving from dawn till dark at her own work, and poor little Phyllis, with a house like this, and seven people in it, would break down, and get haggard and old in a month, if she had to do the entire work of it without help."

"That doesn't prove your share to be the lion's share," he argued doggedly. "Besides, that's not all I meant."

She eyed him more surprisedly than before.

"My dear boy," she said, "you surely didn't mean to suggest that we ought to have a *birthday party* dinner every evening, because we couldn't afford it, and it wouldn't be right, either, in war-time."

"No," he agreed, "it wouldn't."

"We're such busy and such hard-up people now, Angus," she went on in a worried tone. "It would be useless for us to attempt to live otherwise than very simply."

"Yes, but there's no need for us to live in such an 'anyhow' way," he maintained.

There was real bitterness in his tone, the

more amazing because this quiet, wistful-looking boy was so little given to complaining that his wants were liable to be overlooked. It was so much his way to take things as he found them, without criticism or protest.

Shirley's heart contracted suddenly, with a miserable feeling of shame and failure. She thought of the dainty, exquisite mother who had gone from them seven years before, and of the hard muddled years that had passed since then, especially the last one, when she and Rene had been too busy, money more scarce than usual, and Myra no longer there to manage. She had fancied until now that she was the only member of the family who really minded, but she resolved now that, come what might, the careless ways of the household must be mended. She began feverishly to make plans for guarding against all laxity. She, as well as Rene and Phyllis, had been "letting things go" too much lately, she told herself. It was no use shutting one's eyes to the truth. The boys would all their lives remember, and make merciless comparisons. It was no light consideration, this.

She was thinking so hard and disturbedly that she forgot to answer him; and he, pursuing his own train of reflections, did not notice the omission.

"I'm going round to Conway's to-night; to play billiards," he said presently. "Have

my shirts come back from the laundry yet, do you know, Shirley ? ”

His voice was anxious, and she was glad to be able to tell him that they had. She recollected pretty, fluffy-haired little Nellie Conway, then, for whom Angus had lately taken to buying sweets, and that Angus had been to the Conways' to dinner the night before last, and she wondered no longer what had inspired his bitter criticism. She felt a little bitter herself at his masculine unreasonableness, for the Conways had three well-paid maids, two leisured grown-up daughters, and a capable mother over all. But still—there *was* justification for his complaint.

He bade her gently to go to bed early, and went inside. But she scarcely heeded his words, or noticed his going.

“ If you just never let yourself off,” she was saying to herself, “ it will work simply enough. Never listen to your own whinings and excuses, and you'll get through somehow.”

The clatter of dishes in the kitchen had ceased, and Rene and Phyllis came out to join her on the verandah.

“ It's a treat to see the little fusser so quiet and reposeful-looking,” Phyllis said, and the two sisters regarded her with much and comical self-satisfaction.

They little guessed that, for all their pains, Shirley was at that particular moment “ fussing ” more than ever.

CHAPTER VIII

" FAR ACROSS THE DESERT SANDS "

THEY sat, two frightened-looking children, side by side, upon the window-seat in Doctor Deering's waiting-room.

Nancy's face was pale and resolved. At intervals she drew a long, fluttering breath, because her heart was beating so fast, and the long breath seemed to relieve her.

Chris was clasping and unclasping her hands nervously, and each time the maid came to summon the next patient into the doctor's presence, she clutched Nancy's arm, and gave a little gasp of apprehension.

Three people had gone in to see the doctor, and left the house, since the children had been shown into the room. Now there only remained, besides themselves, a man with a bandage about his wrist. When eventually he was summoned, Nancy drew two or three of those long, fluttering breaths, and Chris spoke in a dismayed whisper.

" Oh, I wish we hadn't come ! "

" We *had* to come ! " returned Nancy in a low, desperate voice.

"I'm so awf'ly frightened of him," breathed Chris.

"There's nothing to be frightened about," said Nancy, trembling. "And we have to do it, anyhow—for Adam's sake." They had fallen into the way of calling the doctor's son just Adam, between themselves.

"S'posing he's very mad with us for coming, when we haven't got any diseases or anything the matter with us?" suggested Chris.

"He'll be maddest with me, then," said Nancy, "because I have to do the speaking. It's not nearly so bad for you, Chris. You only have to come in with me. I often wish I wasn't the eldest."

They both started then, because the door across the hall opened, and a moment later the maid appeared again, and said, smiling:

"The doctor is ready now."

Hand in hand they went into the dreadful presence, their knees shaking under them, and their hearts thumping wildly. The old man seemed to them bigger and more formidable-looking than ever, and his eyebrows more alarming.

Nancy broke desperately into the speech she had planned, as he came towards them.

"Good-morning. I am Nancy Russell, and this is Chris Russell, and Doctor Russell is our father," she said rapidly. "We haven't any diseases to be attended to, but

we want to ask you if you will kindly give us your son's address, 'cause it's very important, and——"

"Bless my soul!" broke in the doctor, and drew his bushy eyebrows down over his eyes, and stared at them in quite a fierce-looking way. Then he gave them each a chair.

"Don't be in such a hurry," said he. "Tell me quietly, now, *what's* the matter?"

"There's nothing the matter with either of us," Nancy insisted bravely. "We just want to ask you if you will kindly give us your son's address. We want to write to him, Chris and me, and it's very serious, or we wouldn't ask you."

"Ah," said he, and his eyes twinkled. Doctor Russell had told him that his children were "old-fashioned kids."

"Has the rascal been borrowing money from you, and gone off without paying his debts, madam?" he asked sternly.

"Oh, no," answered Nancy. "He doesn't owe us a penny. He's never even spoken to us, but we know he's brave and splendid and wonderful, and that's one of the reasons why we want to write to him."

Adam's father chuckled delightedly.

"Hero-worship, eh?" he said. "Well, now, and what are you going to say to him in your letters?"

Nancy hesitated, and Chris pressed her hand to give her courage.

"I'm sorry, but I can't tell you that," she said, with quiet firmness. "It's a secret."

To their great relief he only laughed.

"But supposing I say I won't give you the address until you tell me the secret?" he suggested.

Nancy looked a little dismayed, but resolved still.

"We will come and ask you another day," she said, "and we'll keep on coming till you do tell us."

"Will you, indeed?" he exclaimed. "The old trick of the importunate widow, eh? Well, in that case, there's no hope for me, I can see."

Five minutes later, they were out in the street again, the dread ordeal over. And safely clasped in Nancy's hand was an envelope that bore Sergeant Adam Deering's exact form of address in the Australian Imperial Force.

"He's not nearly so bad as he looks," said Nancy.

That evening Nancy and Chris wrote the letters they had planned, to Adam Deering and David Chester.

They made short work of their communications to David, but Adam's involved much preliminary discussion and anxious thought.

"Of course," said Nancy, "we must never mention Miss Kenning's name to him, because that would be like thrusting a sword into a gaping wound. We must not let him think we know about his heart being broken."

"How'd it do to send him a lot of comic papers to cheer him up?" suggested Chris.

But Nancy scoffed at the idea.

"As if comic papers would amuse a man with a broken heart!" she said. "Can't you see that he has to be comforted before he can be amused?"

Five weeks later, an amazed Adam received the following unexpected letters from Australia :

"DEAR MR. DEERING,

"I suppose you will be very surprised to get this letter because there has been no formle introduction between us, but our father knows your father, and we live at 'The Anchorage' in the same street as your old home, and perhaps you know us by sight. We have admired your splendid caracter and noble deeds printed in the newspapers for some time past and we have followed your carreer with breathless interest and mingled delight and admirration. Chris is two years younger than me, but she is not too young to feel her heart swell with pride for the heroe who once dwelt in the same street as we do ourselves. How strange and sad is life, is it not? But it is a great priviledge to live, is it not? Sometimes I fane would flee from all the weariness and pain of life, but one can do such a lot of good by living, can one not? And besides, the harder one's

heart aches one day, the more it will thrill with joy another day. So I do not give way to despair when all seems darkest, for the world is full of sunshine after all, even though it is at times so strange and sad and full of pain and cruelty.

"Our father is an army doctor now, and went away to Egypt six months ago. We have a great friend at the war named David Chester. He is a lieutenant. We have written to tell him you are there. I think you will agree with us, when you meet him, that he is very fascinating. He married our beloved school-teacher, Miss Stockley, who is now Mrs. Chester. She is a true noble devoted woman. But the world is full of noble sincere angelick sweet loving sympathetic women, and the longer I live the more this fact is impressed upon my mind. I will not take up any more of your time, but I hope you will answer this, and I hope one day to shake you by the hand. I am knitting a pair of socks for you with your batallion colours in. With best wishes,

"I remain

"Your sincere friend,

"NANCY RUSSELL."

The letter from Chris ran :

"DEAR MR. DEERING,

"I hope you will be pleased to get letters from us. I said I did not think you

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were at all intrested in us, but Nancy says perhaps you are intrested in us, but it wouldn't be ettikette to appeer intrested in us without us bowing first which we could not do without an introduction, but being a soldier makes a lot of diference, so now we are writting to you. I often think about life and how intresting it is to all of us, though we dont know it and just when we think we are most misrable and would like to die, there is something loveley just round the corner and we wouldnt die for anything not on perpose I mean if we only knew what was coming. These reflexions were bread in my mind by a story I read in a maggazene about a girl who comitted suacide by stabbing (she had Spanish blood in her vanes) because she thought there was nothing left to live for, and all the time there was and a much better man loved her, and she got better because she did not push the daggar in quite far enough, and they got married and she found she didn't really care for Dempster after all. What she thought was love was really only girlish infattiation. Have you read it. Remember when in the thick of battle that our hearts would be torn if you got shot, although we have never been introduced.

“ Best wishes from

“ Your sincere friend,

“ CHRISTINE RUSSELL.”

Nancy and Chris would have been glad if they could have seen the pleased expression in Adam's "recklessly despairing eyes" as he folded up their letters and placed them in his pocket-book, but, much as they desired to have his risible faculties forced into play, it is probable that they would have considered the several laughs to which he gave vent during the perusal of their letters, highly unnecessary, and the result of a mistaken sense of humour.

Their communications to David Chester were marked "Strictly Private," in red ink, and no news of school or home or holiday doings were given as usual. After a preliminary hasty congratulation on his safe escape from Gallipoli, they had plunged straight into the matter which lay so heavily upon their minds.

Said Nancy :

"Chris and I are dreadfully worried about a soldier named Adam Deering who went back to Egypt last week. He cut his leave short and went back again because his heart is broken by blighted hopes. It would not be fair for me to tell you any more of his secret than this, for I feel sure it is buried deep in his own bosom from the peering eyes of the world—not that I mean you have got peering eyes. But I must tell you this much, for we are filled with the torturing fear that he is going to try his hardest to

get shot the first chance he gets. It is of course a more glorious way of dying than committing suicide, besides not being so wicked, or we think he'd have blown out his brains here. Please Mr. Chester will you seek him out and keep your eye on him as much as possible (he is in the same batallion as you are, so it will be easy) and will you try to cheer him as only you know how and weene him from his despirate resolve. He must not, shall not die in the flour of his manhood."

Then followed Adam's number and company, and Nancy's love and signature, and, folded within this impassioned appeal, was a letter from Chris in similar strain.

When he had read these epistles, and laughed over them heartily (the writers' peace of mind would have been seriously disturbed if they could have known how much he had laughed), David strolled to the entrance of his tent, and, shading his eyes with his hand, looked out with a whimsical smile over the wide expanse of canvas roofs, stretching away into the distance.

"Adam, my boy," he muttered, "take care how you behave, for my laughing and eagle eye is upon you."

CHAPTER IX

A PORTRAIT

OUT in the garden studio Rene, at her easel, glanced with an absorbed expression back and forth from the crayon study upon which she was engaged to her model on the packing-case platform.

Phyllis was the model, seated on a camp-stool, with her hair pinned into a knot on her neck, her shoulders bared down to the old silk scarf Rene had arranged under them. She sat very still, a profile figure, holding the book she was reading at an awkward angle, so that her face might be upturned.

Rene was taking advantage of her temporary freedom from classes to indulge in a riot of congenial work. Peter and Bobby and the little boys next door had given her short, fidgety sittings, unsuspecting friends and relations who called at the house were lured to the studio, and there compelled to pose in various interesting attitudes. Shirley had sat for her, darning stockings, but ceasing work during the time required to sketch in her busy little hands. A bearded and ragged old man, who wanted to weed the front

garden for three shillings, had been prevailed upon instead, for two shillings and a pair of Mr. Kayle's old boots, to stand still, spade in hand, in the studio, from eleven o'clock till twelve. And Phyllis had agreed to be model for an hour every afternoon.

It was half-past three now, and this was the second pose she had assumed this afternoon.

In the first she had faced the artist, and her shoulders had been covered. The book had been in her lap, and she had read three chapters while the drawing was made.

But Rene had been working only ten minutes at the new pose, when she stopped, and sighed.

"*Must* you read?" she asked plaintively.

"As I said before, it's not quite so deadly for me when you'll let me, and it's just as good practice for you," said Phyllis.

"It limits me horribly to always have you in positions that make reading possible," Rene persisted. "Everybody wants to read, or sew, or something. I'd far rather have you looking at me, with all your expression visible. It wouldn't be against your principles, either; to do nothing for just half an hour."

Rene's tone was bitterly pleading, and Phyllis was not proof against it. She laughed, abandoned her attitude, and with good-humoured resignation submitted to be deprived of her book and rearranged according to her sister's liking.

A few minutes later, Rene was happily at work again, and Phyllis, on her elevated stool, her hands beautifully placed in her lap, her blue, calm eyes fixed gravely upon the artist, was thinking.

And thinking was what, above all things, Phyllis least desired to do that afternoon.

There were days innumerable—and this was one of them—when Phyllis suffered so much at her own cruel hands that she seized at any easy opportunity of escaping from herself and her merciless thoughts.

If you had asked any of the Kayles whether Phyllis were given to "worrying," they would have laughed at the bare idea; if you had hinted at the possibility of her being ambitious to do anything in the world save enjoy herself easily, they would have negatived it at once. Phyllis was the most complacently effortless person in the world, they would have told you. She took after Father in that respect, they might have added, and there they would have left the matter.

They would have been astonished had they learned that Phyllis often lay awake when they all were asleep, anxiously thinking about every one of them, anxiously thinking of herself and her future, which she was firmly resolved should be no ordinary one.

She had demanded of herself, years ago, that some day she should launch out upon a splendid career, and follow it with all the

concentrated strength of her body and brain. She was convinced that some great, unusual talent lay dormant within her, tormenting her in its over-long sleep. She was as sure of this as she was mystified by the problem of what this special talent was, and of the paths into which it would lead her.

Her sisters had made up their minds about themselves when they were very young—their talents had been so evident. Myra had always loved, and cultivated her genius for, dainty home crafts. Rene had been drawing faces and intending to become an artist when she grew up, in her smallest girlhood. Shirley had always inclined naturally to music. None of them, save herself, had been, at seventeen, undecided and wondering.

Phyllis had given considerable thought, too, to the problem of her father and his apathy. The others did not consider him a problem. They criticised him a little sharply sometimes, in tired or anxious moments, but most often excused him on the ground of his sadness, and consequent lack of interest, after the death of their mother, to whom he had been passionately devoted.

But Phyllis's thoughts about him went deeper. That he had some natural laziness in him she knew. She understood that, because the feeling seized upon her too, sometimes, like a numbing germ.

She knew exactly how he felt when he

slipped away to town and shirked teeth for the day—just as she shirked her household tasks—or faced them, and dealt with them, in slow, half-hearted fashion.

She wondered whether he, like herself, had ever desired, keenly, to do something splendid in the world, and whether he had been over-long in discovering his vocation, and so had just gone unenthusiastically into the domain of teeth, because he seemed as likely to succeed there as anywhere else. And whether the tardy realisation had come to him, some time when it was too late for him to turn back, and follow where it might have led him, and if this was partly the secret of his apathy, and depressing silences.

Sometimes she was terrified by the fear that she, too, might make the mistake of a wrong choice, and drift through the years afterwards, ineffectual and gloomy. She knew her disappointment would not be of the clamorous type. It did not seem improbable to her, that in the event of failure she might become a peevish, silent, dreary repetition of her father.

She candidly admitted to herself, as any moralist would have told her, that her duty lay in cheerfully performing the multitude of humble tasks that lay right to her hand, in this large, needy household. She was the only member of it really free to respond to its numerous claims, which, had she attended to

them thoroughly, would have allowed her practically no time to foster personal ambition or develop talent in any other than the domestic sphere in which she had been called from school a year ago to labour, and which held so little attraction for her.

They all blamed her for her negligent housekeeping, from her father, with his vague resentment of her lack of attention to his professional rooms, down to Bobby, who considered her remissness in the matter of puddings unforgivable. She airily defended herself against all their chidings, because she knew that if they had had any suspicion of how much she blamed herself, her sisters, at least, would have sought eagerly to excuse her, and that would have made her burden of self-reproach heavier than it was already. It was better to let other people lecture her, for there were times when she sickened at the prospect of her own censure, such a thorough business she made of it.

Rene was making final strokes in her drawing, her head on one side, judging it.

"It's done," she said presently. "Thank you, Phyl. You've been a good kid. It was a beautiful pose, and I believe I've put good work into it. Come and see."

Phyllis came, saw, and approved.

"It's nearly as lovely as the original," she said.

Rene was studying the face on the easel

reflectively—the wide forehead, with its faint pucker between the brows, the lazy, humorous, enigmatic eyes—she had caught their expression wonderfully—the firm, unsmiling mouth, the pretty, indomitable young chin.

“I believe there’s a lot in that face, Phyl,” she said slowly. “It contradicts you dreadfully. How is it that you’re satisfied just to drift on from day to day, a lazy, purposeless little shirker? It must be that you’re not properly awake yet. I’d be very sorry for you having to be the home girl, when you don’t like housework, if I thought you had any other ambition, but—haven’t you a single one, Phyl?”

“My dear girl,” retorted Phyllis, “if I had an ambition, it might result in another brass plate upon our fence, and the populace would begin to make jokes about us. Those brazen Kayles! Don’t be preachy, Rene. Come and let’s have some tea, for all that its consequences will be cups to wash.”

“By all means, let’s have some tea,” said Rene.

CHAPTER X

NEIGHBOURS

NANCY and Chris had spent Christmas at home, and three weeks away, with their mother, in the refreshing coolness of Mittagong. At the end of that time they were back in Sydney, and Mrs. Russell had telephoned to the Red Cross depot at which she had worked continuously, except for this one brief holiday, since the date of its opening, to say she would be back at her post on the morrow.

"I've given you as much time as I can possibly spare," she said to the children. "You'll have to content yourselves now, playing in the garden, until school begins again."

But Genevieve Chester was at "The Anchorage" to dinner that evening, and begged that Nancy and Chris might be allowed to come and play in her garden instead, until the close of the holidays.

"It would cheer me up wonderfully to have them staying with me," she said, "though perhaps it's not quite reasonable of me to ask for them, because I myself go to

town every afternoon now. Yes, I must tell you about that. I've accepted a position as Fall's pianist. I should never have thought of applying for it, but Mr. Fall, whom I met on the Soldiers' Entertainment Committee, persuaded me to accept it."

"I'm glad you did," said Mrs. Russell. "Such congenial work will help to keep you from dwelling overmuch upon your war anxieties."

"It is a help," agreed Genevieve. "I felt rather strange and nervous at first playing to such a big audience of apparently inattentive people, but I got over that after the first day or two, and it is an absolute joy, and a revelation too, to perform with Shirley Kayle, the little violinist, you know. I'm altogether in love with her, though I've known her personally only a few weeks."

Genevieve did not add that she was dedicating the whole of the salary she earned at Fall's to the different War Funds, or such individual cases of need among soldiers' people as came under her notice. After a little further talk concerning the daily musical recitals in the fashionable Tea Room, she returned to the discussion of the invitation she had just issued to the children.

"I'll make a point of being free every morning and evening, if you'll only let me have them," she said, "and they are so resourceful that they could always find plenty

of amusement for themselves in the afternoons, with the help of the little Clarks next door, who have a dear little docile pony. And Mattie is a very superior, trustworthy girl; you could feel quite satisfied to leave them in her charge while I was out."

She was very eager, and so were the children. In the early days of her marriage Nancy and Chris had spent a few hilarious week-ends with the young couple in their pretty brown bungalow at Lindfield, on the North Shore Line. Of course, it would not be a hilarious holiday this time, with David Chester in khaki on the other side of the world, but they had known and loved Genevieve Stockley long before they had made David's acquaintance, and Genevieve Chester was the same charming, indulgent person as Genevieve Stockley had been.

Mrs. Russell was glad to give her consent to an arrangement which promised to afford so much pleasure to this soldier's wife, and to her own little girls besides, and the following afternoon one of "The Anchorage" maids accompanied them to the Quay, and there handed them over to the care of Mrs. Chester, on her way home from Fall's.

Genevieve greeted them radiantly.

"I *am* going to enjoy the next fortnight," she said, as they took their seats in the train at Milson's Point, after crossing the harbour in the ferry. "With David safely away from

Gallipoli, I don't think there will be any need to worry about him for a while. Of course, we'll miss him just the same, but we'll pretend that he's only away in Melbourne, or up the country, on business."

"And that he'll be home in a fortnight, and we are just keeping you company till he comes back," supplemented Chris.

"I wonder does Mr. Chester ever play 'Peace,' over at the War?" said Nancy.

"Oh, I think all soldiers do that," returned Vieve, "just for a cheering-up while, now and then, when the guns are quiet."

"I don't think Adam Deering ever will," said Chris.

Vieve looked surprised.

"Adam Deering? Oh, that was the soldier we saw in Fall's, wasn't it?" she said. "And why do you think *he* will never play at 'Peace,' Chris?"

But it was Nancy who answered her.

"We have decided to tell you a little bit about him, just as much as we've told Mr. Chester," she said, "only not in the train, 'cause it's a great secret, and Chris oughtn't to have mentioned it here."

So they confided to her as much as they judged it right to say about the matter, as they drove from Lindfield station to the brown bungalow.

"We thought it wouldn't be right to tell Mr. Chester and not you," said Nancy,

“ ’cause husbands and wives are not supposed to have secrets from each other, I know.”

They were not to be shaken in their belief that Adam harboured a desperate determination to die, by Vieve’s refusal to believe that his ambition was fixed so longingly upon so dark a goal.

“ If you knew his tragic story, you would understand how he must feel about life,” Nancy told her.

“ Does your mother know you are writing to Mr. Deering? ” asked Vieve.

“ Yes, we told her, and she said she thought it was very nice, as we were neighbours. But we haven’t told Mother what we fear for him, ’cause she had enough to worry about already.”

At this point the cab drew up at the gate of the Chesters’ home.

It was the prettiest of bungalows, with quaintly designed, room-like verandahs, which rose and passion-vines, jessamine and virginia creeper, were beginning to screen lightly from the public gaze. It stood on a hill-top, and was blessed by its command of distant views—wherein, says the poet, enchantment lies. From the front, you could look across a pleasant foreground of other people’s bungalows, and a level stretch of gum-trees, to a wide, home-dotted hillside, and then a line of very far hills, blue and lonely. From the back verandah you looked

beyond another gum forest to red-roofed houses on another slope, and caught a glimpse, to the right, of the trains rushing out of the station, bound for the suburbs further along the line, or up towards the terminus by the water, where the ferry-boats from the city came to meet them.

Vieve hovered about the dainty room she had prepared for her guests, while they took off their hats and changed their shoes.

"I've asked the little Clarks to come in this evening," she said. "I thought it would be nice for you to get acquainted as soon as possible. Then you can invite them in whenever you like, and of course they'll want you to go in to their place, too."

"And what about the people *this* side of you?" asked Chris, glancing through the window. "Haven't they got any nice children, too? We might get tired of *only* Clarks every day."

"We shan't do anything of the kind," Nancy hastened to say, aghast at her sister's plain-spoken remark. "And if they should get tired of us, we can entertain ourselves very well without visitors, just as we do at home, only of course it will be more fun here."

"They really are *very* nice little girls, Chris," said Vieve meekly. "I don't know the people on the other side at all. They have only lately come, and they don't seem attractive. They have no girls, either. I

suppose there's a woman in the house, but so far, I've only seen a tall, bent, seamy-faced man, and an old fellow who works about in the garden, and a rough kind of boy, about fourteen—rather a larrikin, I think—he shouts so, and he swears at his dog for howling when he plays his wretched bugle-calls. They are so horribly out of tune that I can hardly refrain from howling myself, and just as agonisedly as the dog, when I hear them. I'm afraid there's no hope of companionship for you with your neighbours on the left, Chris."

"I daresay the Clarks will do very well, then," Chris said, with gracious resignation, "especially as they have a pony."

At six o'clock the next morning a bugle sounded the Reveille, horribly out of tune, in their dreams, and a dog lifted up its voice, and howled an anguished protest.

"Shut-tup, can't cher?" a boy's angry voice exclaimed, and then again the Reveille sounded, again and again, sometimes more and sometimes less out of tune, and always with its persistent, anguished canine accompaniment.

"Shut-tup, will yer?" the rough voice shouted furiously, and the howls died away in half-suppressed whimperings.

"That's the larrikin boy next door," Chris remarked, waking, and meeting her sister's just-opened eyes.

Nancy lay quiet for a while. Then :

"What did you dream?" she asked.

Chris sighed.

"Oh, nothing much," she answered evasively.

"Tell me about it, though," Nancy persisted. "Go on, Chris; you can't help it if it *was* silly."

It was the habit of these two to relate their nocturnal adventures to each other, first thing in the morning, and Chris's dreams had been a sore trial to her of late; for she had had a run of short and particularly foolish ones, whereas Nancy had been dreaming so romantically and thrillingly, that Chris had grown ashamed, and no longer even derived amusement from her own.

But the morning confession had to be made, and reluctantly she began.

"I dreamt Mr. Chester was back," she said, and paused.

"Well, I'm sure that was lovely," said Nancy encouragingly. "Go on, Chris."

Chris thrust her foot out of bed, and fastened her gaze upon it, yawning with affected carelessness.

"He wasn't much like what he used to be," she said in an unconcerned tone. "He had curly, black hair, and short, fat legs, and very big, dirty boots on, and—er—he was smoking a radish instead of a pipe."

Nancy's bed was shaken with laughter, but Chris remained grave.

"What did *you* dream?" she asked unwillingly.

"Oh, *I* dreamt about Adam Deering," replied Nancy, in a tone of quiet superiority.

Chris kicked her bedclothes in exasperation. Nancy had had most interesting dreams of Adam lately, and she had never dreamt of him once, as yet. It was very galling.

"You and I were over in Egypt, Chris," began Nancy, "and we went to see Adam Deering in his tent, and he looked so handsome and gallant, but his face was very stern and sad, and there was still that look of reckless despair deep in his eyes. And he talked to us in such beautiful language—Middle Ages talk—wasn't it funny?—and he kept bowing to us at nearly everything he said, but all the same, there was a kind of bitter sneer in his voice the whole time he was talking. He said to us, 'What would ye, fair maids?' And I said, 'You mustn't think all girls are like Miss Kenning, 'cause they're not.' And Mr. Chester was there too, and Adam turned round to him and said, 'By my faith, Chester, here are two damsels who would fain restore my faith in women.' And he laughed a lot—mirthless kind of laughter, you know. And then a battle began, just outside the tent, and he snatched up a sword, and waved it round his head, and kept on making rushes to try and get out,

and we were all holding him back, and begging him to promise he wouldn't try to get killed. And at last he said, ' Well, fair maids, if you can prove your words, and restore my faith in women within six months, I shall not try to die, but take my chance. If not, talk no more to me of women, for I shall rush headlong into the thick of battle, and never come out again alive ! ' "

Chris looked envious, but she answered scornfully :

" You can't call it dreaming, what you think before you go to sleep—just 'cause you're in bed, even if you *have* got your eyes shut."

It was significant, perhaps, that Nancy made no direct reply to this speech.

" Chris, what if that vision was sent to us on purpose," she said impressively, " as a sign that we really are meant to perform this great task ? "

But Chris was not inclined to tolerate the idea of Nancy being visited by dreams of deep import, when she herself was put off with visions of a short-legged David smoking a radish instead of a pipe.

" Dreams don't mean anything, nowadays," she said, and added, to change the subject : " Can you hear the larrikin boy next door playing his bugle ? "

" I should think I can," replied Nancy. " He woke me up."

" I haven't heard him swear, though, have you ? " Chris asked.

Once more the next-door bugle sounded, and the next-door dog broke into wailings, and once more the rough voice inelegantly ordered silence.

" If you won't shut up," it said in a final tone, " I'll knock your mongrel head off, I will."

Chris hopped out of bed, and over to the window.

" Is ' mongrel ' a swear-word ? " she asked hopefully, and Nancy replied that it might be, sometimes.

" I wish I could see him ! " Chris said longingly, and added, after a pause :

" I wonder does he swear *every* day ? "

CHAPTER XI

CHRIS GOES VISITING

RUTH and Peggy Clark had promised to come and play tennis with Nancy and Chris on the first afternoon of their stay at the brown bungalow. The pony was away for the day, getting a pair of new shoes, so they were not able to make its acquaintance until the following morning.

At two o'clock, Nancy, garbed in a pretty frock of pale blue linen, her brown curls tied back with a ribbon of exactly the same shade, sat alone in the drawing-room, with a responsible feeling of hostess-ship upon her.

As for Chris—that young lady, dressed in an every-day zephyr frock, and troubled by no feeling of responsibility whatsoever, was in one of the farthest corners of the garden, her face pressed close to a chink in the palings which permitted of a glimpse “next door.” Now, a point to be particularly noted is that this special chink in the fence was quite a wrong chink to select for an inquisitive peep into the Clarks’ garden. For the Clarks lived on the other side of the brown bungalow, and the fence against which Chris

pressed her small, interested countenance was that which divided the Chesters' property from that of the recently arrived neighbours who included a rough young larrikin, somewhat addicted to swearing and to playing a bugle out of tune.

Chris's breath came very softly between parted lips. Her eyes were fixed, in a fascinated stare, upon a spot close to the fence, in the adjoining garden.

The next-door house, lately named "Yerrowar," was not a modern bungalow like the Chesters', but a small, and rather pretty old brick cottage. The garden surrounding it, in contrast with the Chesters' young, prim orchard, and well-kept flower-garden, was rather wild and overgrown, and full of green, sheltered nooks. A pepper tree stood a few feet away from the fence on the other side of which Chris was stationed, and under it a boy was comfortably stretched out, face downwards, a book open on the ground in front of him, his elbows propped to support his chin, which was buried in the palms of his hands. A black and tan sheep-dog—a Kelpie—lay beside him.

He was a long, angular boy, with a sun-burnt, thin, sharply intelligent face. He was reading his book with an air of absorbed enjoyment and happiness—now and then he smiled, a peculiarly sympathetic smile. The book was evidently one after his own heart;

a pirate tale, most likely—a tale that reeked of blood, battle, and violent adventure from start to finish.

Inquisitive little Chris strained her eyes to see the title, but in this object she was frustrated until, coming to the end of a chapter, the boy altered his position, rolled over on to his side, with his face towards her, and the book held in his right hand, thus enabling her to see, printed in large, gilt letters on the cover : *The Girls of Dorrington Hall*.

Chris gave an incredulous gasp.

“A *girl's* book !” she exclaimed the next moment, in perfectly audible amazement.

The boy sprang to his feet in an instant, with alert glance darting in all directions.

“Who's that ?” he demanded, in a truculent tone.

Chris, rather startled herself, but still curious, decided on answering him, since the fence was between them.

“It's only me,” she said, in a conciliatory voice—“in here at Mrs. Chester's.”

He regarded the fence uncertainly, moved towards it, raised himself suddenly on one of the horizontal supports, and put his head over the top.

It was a charming little upturned face that he looked down upon, with blue, innocent eyes, rather scared in their expression now, the underlip of the scarlet mouth caught in

sudden apprehension between the white little teeth.

He stared at her with an odd expression upon his face—it really seemed more of consternation than of fury—and, since he did not utter a single oath, or indeed a word of any sort, Chris, greatly daring, smiled up at him—a funny little half-frightened, half-saucy smile—and, her heart thumping very hard, said :

“ Hello ! ”

“ Hello ! ” returned the boy, flushing under his tan.

Chris felt suddenly mistress of the situation. She smiled again.

“ I must apologise for looking through your fence,” she said.

He looked at her with a more helplessly perturbed expression than ever, wrinkled his forehead, and finally spoke again.

“ What’s *your* name ? ” he asked slowly.

“ Chris Russell,” she answered pleasantly.

“ What’s yours ? ”

“ Gilbert Mason.”

“ You *are* the boy who plays the bugle, aren’t you ? ” Chris asked, in a rather puzzled tone. The general meekness of his voice and manner made her doubt it.

“ Yes.”

“ I wasn’t *quite* sure,” said Chris.

He made no rejoinder to that.

“ Well, I think I’ll have to go inside now,” she said politely. “ Good-bye.”

She turned, and moved a few steps away from the fence, when his voice arrested her.

"I've got a wallaby in here," he said.

She paused, and turned towards him again.

"A wallaby?" she exclaimed.

"Yes."

"Is it alive, or stuffed?"

"Alive."

He was hopelessly monosyllabic, this boy, but his statement was interesting

"Does it bite?" she questioned.

"No," he answered.

"How big is it?"

"Almost two feet high."

"I'd love to see it," she said.

"It's right across the garden," he returned.

"You couldn't see it from here."

But Chris was a person of resource.

"Would you mind if I came into your place, then, just for a minute?" she asked.

He looked relieved, for this was exactly what he desired, though he had lacked the courage to make the suggestion, but—

"No," was all he said.

"Shall I come in the back way?" she asked, "or—it would be better if I could come straight over the fence, 'cause Mattie might see me going to the gate, and call me back, an' make a fuss. Will you help me over?"

"If you like," he replied.

The next minute she was on the other side.

The dog was vastly interested in the whole proceeding. Chris patted his head, ascertained that his name was Jack, and then made further inquiry regarding the wallaby.

"Come on," said the boy; "this way."

He took her hand, and, casting queer little sidelong glances upon her as they went, led her to the opposite side of the garden, to a wired-in space where a bright-eyed wallaby sat up, its head on one side, watching their approach.

Chris cried out with delight, and went into raptures over it. She extracted from the boy, one at a time, the facts that he had caught it when it was quite a baby, away back in the bush country where he used to live, that its name was Gundy, and that if she offered it some of the food it liked best, it would accept it from her hands, without making any attempt to bite her.

He ran into the house then, and returned, a minute later, with some lettuce leaves and a piece of Mexican chocolate, for which sweetmeat it seemed Gundy had contracted an epicurean liking since his coming to Sydney.

Chris held the tempting food through the wires.

"Come along, sweet darling!" she called softly. "Come along, dear little Gundy boy; come and take it, darling sweetheart."

Thus adjured, the queer little creature came leaping towards her, cautiously seized upon the dainties she offered, retired a few paces, and, holding them in his slender hands, began eating them, regarding her meanwhile with bright, watchful eyes.

"Isn't he a darling!" exclaimed Chris rapturously, turning to the boy, who responded by an embarrassed smile, and a glimmer of appreciation from under lowered eyelids.

She had entirely forgotten her expected visitors now, and was enjoying herself hugely in the company of her taciturn host. He led her, dumbly, to a tool-shed next, and showed her a beautiful little boat he had made, complete with a maze of intricate rigging.

But here a terrible thing happened. Chris was examining the wee ship with curious fingers, while the boy went to the end of the shed to get another toy of his own manufacture for her inspection, when suddenly, she knew not afterwards how, she broke one of the slender masts.

She stood petrified with horror at the result of her meddling. She forgot the queer, awkward kindness of the boy, and recalled his rough voice shouting, in threatening accents, to his dog. She pictured herself standing helpless before him, while he rained blows upon her shoulders, shouting savagely, "Shut-tup, will yer?" when she cried for

help. How bitterly she regretted now her folly in coming here, and putting herself in the power of such a rough monster! She thought how far she was from the bungalow, and how the sound of her cries would never reach the ears of its inmates.

All this passed through her mind in a flash. The next moment she heard his footsteps approaching behind her.

She turned to him with a white face, and eyes dark with fear. She was trembling visibly.

The boy stopped short, went oddly pale himself, and then hurried towards her.

"What's the matter? Do you feel sick?" he asked in an alarmed voice.

"I've broken your boat," she said steadily, but her lips quivered a little.

He looked immensely and instantly relieved.

"That don't matter," he declared; "not a bit."

"But look at it," she said; "the dear little mast."

He set the boat carelessly aside.

"It don't matter a bit," he insisted sturdily.

"I'm awfully sorry, Gilbert," she said, relieved at his indulgence, but more contrite than ever.

He seemed to receive a fresh shock when she pronounced his name. It brought the

queer, embarrassed smile to his lips again, and the half-hidden glimmer of appreciation to his eyes.

But a weighty matter was evidently upon his mind, and, after a minute's silence, he gave vent to it desperately

"You—you weren't scared of me, were you?"

She smiled.

"I thought you might swear at me," she said.

"I don't swear at girls," he said gruffly, and he looked aghast at the idea—"that is, I wouldn't if I had the chance." He hesitated, and then plunged into a tremendous confidence. "Do you know—you're the first little girl I've ever spoken to in all my life."

She was incredulous, but the earnestness of his second assurance convinced her, and so she began to question him until, losing his tongue-tying shyness somewhat, he told her his story.

Until three months ago he had lived away out West, on a selection. His mother had died so long ago that he could not even remember her, and all his life he had lived alone with his father, save for the companionship of the hired men on the selection.

Then Mr. Mason's health had broken down. He had been forced to consult a country doctor, who had ordered him to see a

specialist in Sydney. The result of this was that he had been told he must give up work, and live under the doctor's supervision indefinitely. So he had sold the selection, and come to settle in Sydney with his son, being in a position, so hard and profitably had he laboured, to live independently for the rest of his life. After a fortnight's troubled sojourn in a city hotel, he had consulted a house and estate agent, bought this quiet cottage home on the North Shore Line, and here the two had resumed their life of masculine solitude together, with old Joe Jones, their former cook at "Yerrowar" selection, to run the establishment.

"But who washes up?" asked Chris amazedly.

"Old Joe."

"And can he sweep, and make beds, and everything?"

"Of course."

"And don't you ever have a woman come in to scrub or wash?"

"No."

Chris's eyes grew wider and wider in astonishment. It seemed to her such a very unnatural state of affairs.

"Is your father a woman-hater?" she asked suddenly.

He repudiated the suggestion in a shocked negative.

"Then why don't you have an ordinary

woman housekeeper, with aprons on, to live with you, and do your work, and cook your meals?"

"Old Joe's good enough for us," he replied evasively. "And he's rather attached to Dad, you see."

"But supposing old Joe died? Would you get a woman servant then?" she persisted.

He looked away from her. He found her catechism very trying, because he was helplessly truthful, and knew not the art of parrying questions.

"We mightn't," he replied, after a pause.

"But why?"

"Oh, I dunno," he said uneasily.

But she insisted on a better answer than this, and, since he was a mere tool in her hands, he gave it at length, with his queer, one-sided smile hovering about his mouth.

"I reckon we'd be too scared of her," he said.

She laughed heartily, but with such kindness in her eyes, that he did not really mind, and even began to question her about herself.

"That tall, pretty lady—is she your mother?" he asked.

"Oh, no! That's Mrs. Chester. We don't live here, Nancy and me. We've only come to stay here for a fortnight to finish up our holidays."

His disappointment at this intelligence

was obvious, and so, to minimise it—"I'll always run in to see you whenever we come to see Mrs. Chester," she promised swiftly.

"I often hear her playing the piano," he told her next.

"Yes, she's a wonderful musician," Chris rejoined. "She composes wonderful music, too, only she hasn't made up any new pieces for a long while now. Mr. Chester's away at the War, you know."

"Oh, is he?" This news seemed to interest him greatly.

"Yes, so you can imagine how miserable she must feel all the time. Don't you wish you were old enough to go to the War?"

"I'm nearly fourteen. That's nearly old enough for a bugler, if you have luck."

"Is that what you're practising for?"

"Yes."

"We can hear you next door," said Chris. "I suppose you won't play so much out of tune when you've had more practice."

He looked suddenly very unhappy.

"Does it worry Mrs. Chester when I play?" he asked.

"I'm afraid it does nearly drive her mad," answered Chris gently. "She can hear you swearing at your dog, too."

He crimsoned, in consternation.

"You tell her it won't happen any more," he blurted. "I'll go up the bush a bit to practise. I've got to go crook on old Jack

when he interrupts, but I never thought of the lady hearing."

"And you can leave Jack at home if you go out to practise," she suggested.

But Gilbert shook his head.

"He'd break his old heart if I did," he said.

There was a pause. Inarticulate shyness descended upon the boy again. He stood awkwardly before her, fervently admiring her golden, curly hair, her sweet, pink and white face, her tiny, soft hands. She was, he thought, exactly like a fairy.

Chris was eyeing him curiously.

"Have you read many girls' books?" she asked at last.

"A good few."

"But don't you like boys' books—you know—pirates and things?"

"Rather!"

"Then why do you read girls' books?"

"Oh," he said flushing, "I just like to read about 'em now and then."

"You're a very strange boy," she said, surveying him with her head on one side. "But you're nice," she added, with a smile that dazzled him.

"We'll be very pleased," she went on, in a gracious tone, "if you'll come and have afternoon tea with Nancy and me some day while we're here. I'm sure Mrs. Chester wouldn't mind."

But he declined her invitation.

"You come in here instead," he said, "to-morrow."

Thus it was settled, and then she thought of the Clarks, and said she really *must* go.

So he hurriedly collected, and insisted upon her acceptance of, two ripe peaches, a ball, a book about Red Indians, and a whip, in spite of her assurance that she had no use for the last-named article.

He escorted her to the back gate of the bungalow.

"I say," he began, when they reached it.

"Yes?" she rejoined, and waited. But he was silent.

"Well?" she queried encouragingly.

"Don't tell Mrs. Chester and your sister about me reading girls' books, will you?"

His voice was very earnest.

"All right, I won't," she said, "but I wanted to."

"Don't tell anybody," he added, and she gave him her promise.

The tennis court was deserted, and, as she entered the house, Mattie and Nancy and the two little Clarks rushed to meet her, with exclamations of vast relief.

"Wherever have you been?" cried Mattie. "We've looked for you everywhere."

"I've been next door," explained Chris, eagerly and unrepentantly, "visiting the swearing boy. And I've had a perfectly lovely afternoon."

CHAPTER XII

GILBERT'S STRATEGY

BUT when Vieve came home, and heard the story, she looked troubled and vexed.

"I'm sorry you spoke to the boy, Chris," she said. "I am responsible for your making no undesirable acquaintances while you are here, and there's no getting away from the fact that Master Gilbert Mason can and does swear profusely when he's so disposed."

"But he said you wouldn't ever hear him at it again," Chris argued earnestly. "He's always going out into the bush to swear and play his bugle in future. And I think it's noble of him to bother doing that for you."

"Just as if it's *necessary* for him to swear!" cried Vieve, too responsibly troubled to see the humour of the affair, as she would otherwise have done.

"He has to swear at his dog, when it keeps interrupting his practising," Chris contended, loyally championing her new friend.

"There! He has demoralised you already," declared Vieve, "and your mother will be quite justified in feeling angry with

me for bringing you over here when I had to leave you so much to yourselves."

But Chris sought eagerly to reassure her.

"That's nothing to the mischief I'd have got into at home," she said. "I'll tell Mother it was all my fault, and that you warned us he was a low sort of boy, but he isn't, all the same. Gilbert won't teach me any bad language, 'cause he *never* swears before girls. He said so."

The whole matter was explained and satisfactorily decided after dinner, in the usual telephone conversation with the children's mother.

"He's the nicest boy you ever met in your life, Mother," Chris urged. "And he has the dearest little wallaby, and he was *so* ashamed when I told him Mrs. Chester had heard him swearing, and I've promised to go to his place to tea to-morrow, and meet his father."

"Chris might be a good influence upon him for all his life, Mother," Nancy broke in, suddenly diving her own curly head between Chris and the telephone.

"I'm very sorry, Mrs. Russell," said Vieve. "I really know nothing at all of these people except that I have heard the boy swearing at his dog. He appears to have behaved towards Chris in a gentlemanly fashion, but he is certainly rather a rough diamond. He could hardly be otherwise,

coming so recently from the life he has lived out back."

"Entirely removed from the refining influence of women, Mother," Nancy bobbed in front of the telephone to say.

"And besides," said Chris, displacing her, "I know something about him that none of you know—something that proves how much he yearns for refinement, and all that—only I promised not to tell."

In the end, it was conceded that Chris might go next door for a little while tomorrow afternoon, and that the acquaintance might be continued, or not, according to Vieve's own judgment of Chris's story later on.

"I did want to stay to tea, though," Chris said vexedly. "They will be expecting me, and have ordered extra things to eat."

"But I'm going to bring your new music-teacher, Miss Kayle, home to dinner tomorrow evening," said Vieve, "and I'm sure you wouldn't like to miss her. She's so pretty and sweet."

This was some consolation, and though Nancy remarked soberly that Miss Kayle wouldn't be the first pretty music-teacher they had had, and that beauty was only skin deep after all (at which Vieve wondered a little), still the two were really deeply interested in making Shirley's acquaintance, and, some time during the morning, Vieve,

entering, unobserved, the children's bedroom, where Nancy was standing before the mirror, heard her guest murmuring :

"The door opened, and Nancy Russell, the elder of the two girls, glided into the apartment. Miss Kayle saw before her a tall girl of some twelve summers, with dark, sad eyes set in a white face. There was an expression of strange bitterness about the mouth."

"Oh, Nancy, there wasn't!" exclaimed Vieve, laughing, and Nancy turned startled eyes (set in a pink, embarrassed face) upon her hostess.

"I didn't know you were there," she said. "I was only doing a little bit of pretending, in bookish language. You shouldn't have listened."

"But why set up pretensions to a strangely bitter mouth?" demanded Vieve.

"It sounds nice and romantic," sighed Nancy.

"It doesn't," Vieve contradicted. "Here's a bitter mouth for you." She made a grimace. "I'm sure Miss Kayle would much rather see your own dear little smiling one."

At two o'clock Chris went out into the garden, and applied a bright blue eye to the chink she had discovered in the fence on the previous afternoon.

Nancy was watching longingly from afar off, *i. e.* the back verandah.

Gilbert was waiting patiently on the other side, and when Chris approached he flushed and stiffened.

"Hello, Gilbert!" said Chris.

"Hello!" he returned.

"I can't stay to tea, but I can come in for a little while, and look at Gundy," she told him.

"All right," he answered.

But she was piqued by his ready acquiescence in this modified arrangement.

"You don't seem to care very much about me not staying to tea," she said.

"Yes, I do," he retorted woodenly.

"Of course," she proceeded, in growing exasperation, "if you'd like to change your mind about inviting me in at all, it's not too late. And I'm not at all hard up for friends and something nice to do. Peggy and Ruth Clark want us to go in to their place, and Ruth has nineteen dolls, and they've got a pony, too, and they let me ride on it, *see?* You can't ride on a wallaby, however int'resting it is. I'm sure I don't want to go where I'm not wanted."

She tossed her head, and then, stooping, inserted her eye once more to the chink, to note the effect of her words.

It was not a very striking effect, for he only stood still, staring at the ground. But if only she had known how many hours he had lain awake last night, making plans for

her entertainment, how he had spent the morning, arranging and rearranging his possessions for her inspection! If only she had known of the panic of shyness that had come upon him as the time to meet her again drew near!

There was a moment's silence after her words.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Mason," Chris said then, with chilling hauteur; "I'm going riding."

He raised his eyes at that, and she saw, with surprise and satisfaction, their imploring expression.

"Please don't go," he said with an effort.

She was mollified at once.

"Are you quite sure it's convenient for me to come?" she inquired pleasantly.

"Rather," he answered, losing his shyness in his sudden relief. He smiled radiantly.

"Shall I help you over now?"

Chris glanced back towards the verandah, and met Nancy's wistful, interested gaze.

"Gilbert," she said softly, "please let Nancy come too. She's dying to come."

He gazed at her gleaming, hopeful eye in startled dismay.

"You've no idea how wonderful Nancy is," Chris urged. "She's absolutely lovely. She's got brown hair—a lot longer than mine, and bigger eyes, too. And she's so clever, she can talk in such bookish language—

you'd wonder how she could possibly think it all out. I'm the silliest, plainest thing compared with Nancy."

He gripped his hands behind his back.

"All right," he said slowly, "if she wants to she can come. But do you mind waiting for about half an hour? I've got to do a few things inside yet. Come in about half-past two."

"We'll leave it till three if you like," she said graciously.

"Very well. Come in the back way, and if I'm not at the gate, go straight over to Gundy's corner."

Chris retraced her steps to the house joyfully.

The hour thus left upon their hands was easily filled in with the little Clarks, in whose paddock they continued the riding lessons they had commenced that morning. But promptly at the hour's end they repaired to the back entrance of "Yerrowar."

Gilbert was not there, so Chris led the way to Gundy's enclosure. For a few moments after that, they were both absorbed over the odd creature, who, in spite of being too small and otherwise unsuitable to be ridden like the Clarks' pony, was yet a fascinating pet.

"I wonder where Gilbert is?" said Chris at last. "I'm sure he must have finished his work now."

"Let's go up to the house and knock," suggested Nancy. But at that moment Chris exclaimed:

"Why, here's a note on the gate,—and it's for me."

It was—a note addressed to "Miss C. Russell," thrust securely through the wire of Gundy's gate, in such a conspicuous place that they could not have failed to notice it for more than a minute or two.

Wondering, Chris tore open the envelope, and read the letter it contained—the polite little letter.

"DEAR CHRIS,

"I am very sorry that I have to go out after all. I hope you won't think me rude, or that I wasn't grateful to you and your beautiful sister for coming. I've left the tool-shed open, and put some things there for you to look at and eat. It doesn't matter if you break anything. Father's asleep now. He always lies down in the afternoon, but if he comes out before you go, he'll know who you are, and be very pleased to see you.

"I am

"Yours, etc.,

"GILBERT MASON."

"It must have been very suddenly that he found he had to go out," said Nancy, in a puzzled tone.

"I shan't speak to him to-morrow," declared Chris indignantly. "It's only 'cause you were coming, I believe, an' I told him he needn't mind you, an' how sweet, an' clever, an' brilliant, an' beautiful you were."

But Nancy was more understanding.

"If you hadn't told stories about me," she said bitterly, "if you'd said I was just ordinary, and rather nice, he might have stayed. How'd you like to be told you had to entertain the cleverest and most handsome boy in the world?"

"I'd like it very much indeed," answered Chris cheerfully.

"Well, anyhow," said Nancy, "p'r'aps we'd better go and look in the tool-shed, and see what he's put there."

What he had put there! Chris's eyes warmed and softened at the sight.

A pile of books (all boys' books), with "You can borrow any you like" written eagerly on a slip of paper lying across the topmost—some 'possum skins, some snake skins, some aboriginal curios—the little ship of yesterday, thoroughly repaired, and a tub of water in which to sail her, and on a tray, two large peaches, two large cakes with chocolate icing on top and much sweetened cream inside, a handful of sultanas, a heap of walnuts, a packet of almond rock, and a square of chocolate for Gundy.

Meantime, two miles away, Gilbert was trudging through the bush, bugle in hand, dog at heels.

He stopped when he reached the bottom of a gully he had been descending, and flung himself down on the tough ferns. The dog stretched pantingly at his feet, and watched him with alert, adoring eyes, as he untied a brown-paper parcel he carried, and, after a cautious glance around doubly to assure himself of the solitude of his retreat, settled himself to the happiness of reading the book it contained—*Maisie and her Friends*.

For an hour he read, with varying expressions upon his face—curious, puzzled, smiling, sympathetic. At last he stretched himself, and looked up the gully, in the direction whence he had come.

"Two of 'em at once!" he muttered. "One more brilliant than the other!" He seemed highly pleased to have escaped from such a very alarming situation.

Then he picked up his bugle, smiled widely and sweetly, passed the back of his hand across his mouth, and untunefully sounded "The Retreat." Three times he played it, and grinned in appreciation of his own joke, before he passed on to the other calls, punctuated, all, by a dog's howls of acute and bitter misery.

Then he paused again, to exclaim in a furious voice:

"Shut-tup, will you? Shut-tup, d'you hear? If you *won't* shut up, I'll smash your old skull in."

The threat was rounded off by a phrase of final condemnation, at which the ears of the old dog did not quiver. He swore again, then, but in a kindly tone, patting the animal on the head, and looking about him with satisfied eyes.

The freedom of the unshocked bush was his.

CHAPTER XIII

SNAPSHOTS

THOUGH Nancy was fond of imagining stagey entrances and exits, speeches and actions for herself, she was, in practice, a very unaffected little person, and so, instead of waiting until Shirley had arrived at the house, and then effecting a gliding entrance into her presence, with such interesting accompaniments as eyes of sadness, and a mouth of bitterness, she and Chris ran to meet Vieve and her visitor, as soon as they turned the corner into the street where the brown bungalow stood.

And, so interested were they in receiving their first impressions of Shirley, that neither had a thought to spare for the impression they themselves were creating.

So there was just a merry, eager greeting on both sides, and they all walked on together, talking in pleased voices, because the first impressions had been favourable, and they expected to like each other very much indeed.

"I suppose you've both been practising hard all through the holidays," Shirley said to the children, in a tone of cheerful irony.

"Rather!" Nancy answered. "We've practised for nearly ten minutes, *nearly* every other day since they started."

"Scales at least once a week," said Chris.

"Oh, I'm used to you," returned Shirley. "There are a dozen of you waiting to drive me frantic next week. But I warn you I'm not a bit sweet and patient as Miss Kenning is—as Miss Kenning *was*, and Mrs. Hartridge is, I should say. I went to the wedding on Monday evening, and she made a most beautiful bride."

"Yes," said Nancy. "I suppose she did."

"What's Miss Kenning's husband like?" asked Chris curiously. "We've never seen him, Nancy and me, but we've been trying to imagine him. Nancy thinks he's tall, and dark, and handsome, with a cold, mocking gleam in his eyes, and a slow, gloating smile, and a heartless, rasping laugh."

"Good gracious, no!" exclaimed Shirley. "As if Miss Kenning would have married a melodramatic villain! Why, Mr. Hartridge is an extremely kind man, and just pleasantly good-looking. Whatever gave you ideas of that sort about him?"

"Oh, nothing," said Nancy, with a warning glance at Chris, who blushed and subsided into confusion and silence.

"They are queer kiddies," Vieve remarked, as she ushered Shirley into her own room a few moments later. "They let their

imagination run away with them sometimes; Nancy especially, and indulge in all kinds of fancies about people. But they are generally more romantic than melodramatic in their imaginings. I'm looking forward to hearing their rhapsodies about you to their mother. They'll have such glowing adjectives of praise for you, I'm sure."

"I don't know—they might talk of a haggard creature, with a sour face, and a desperate glare in her eyes," Shirley said anxiously. "I feel like that sometimes, by the end of a hot day." She leaned back in one of Vieve's easy-chairs, and heaved a small sigh.

Vieve laughed at the incongruity of the picture, and then eyed her visitor gravely.

"But you do look terribly tired," she said. "You do, and yet you have a dear little unwonted tinge of colour in your cheeks. I've noticed it particularly, because they have been too pale altogether of late."

"I'm taking a tonic, and it's doing marvels for me," said Shirley hastily.

"It is certainly giving you a little colour," said Vieve. "But, dear, it's hot in the house. Come out on the lawn till dinner-time."

They found Nancy and Chris already seated on the grass, awaiting them. Nancy's fingers were busy over the heel of a sock for Adam Deering, Chris's moistly engaged upon a muffler for anyone who needed it.

Shirley declined a chair, and arranged herself on the grass between the two, and she also brought knitting needles to play upon the welt of a soldier's sock.

Vieve stood for a moment, surveying them with her head on one side.

"A very pretty little war-time group," she said then. "Just keep as you are, everybody, while I get the camera. It will make a nice picture to send to David."

So the group was taken, and then Shirley snapped Vieve, standing beside the wattle tree, to show David how much it had grown since his departure, and then Mattie sounded the gong for dinner.

Nancy and Chris had much to tell, during the meal, of their visit next door, and of the peculiar behaviour of their host in absenting himself during the whole period of their visit.

"I wanted Nancy to stay till he came home," said Chris, laughing. "But it's just as well we didn't, 'cause I don't believe he's home yet. We've been watching both gates."

"But you mustn't think he's rude, or a woman-hater," said Nancy earnestly. "All the lovely things he left in the tool-shed for us proved that he wanted to be nice to us."

"I think he's charming," said Vieve, "and I am glad you made his acquaintance,

Chris. See what a peaceful meal-time we are having in consequence. He has promised Chris that there won't be any more bugling within coo-ee of us, Miss Kayle. We had a terrible visitation last time you were here, didn't we?"

"You must be very sweet and kind not to have protested," Shirley said. "I am not nearly so considerate of people's feelings until afterwards; when it's no use, anyway. I suppose if I had been in your place, I should have stood that bugling for two days, and then acted—not like a lady, either. Instead of writing a polite note of appeal to his father, or awaiting a favourable opportunity of speaking to the boy himself, in gentle remonstrance, I'd have suddenly gone frantic one evening—yes, evening it would have been, not morning—dashed next door, like a horrible little fury, wrested the bugle from the boy's grasp, broken it over his head, and returned home, in ruffled triumph. Then, of course, I'd have stayed awake, wishing I hadn't done it, and unable to enjoy the subsequent peace for remembering how I had come by it. And in the end, I'd have had to buy him a new bugle by way of atonement."

"But you wouldn't really have got any farther than interfering in imagination," said Vieve. "And in imagination I have frequently snatched Gilbert's bugle, and relieved

my feelings by destroying it beyond hope of ever sounding another call."

"I know most people get impulses of the sort when they are exasperated," said Shirley, "but I have a dreadful habit of acting upon mine. You don't seem to believe me, but it's an unfortunate fact. Why, I was horribly rude to one of Father's patients—a soldier, too—some weeks ago. He was innocently strumming on the piano while he was awaiting his turn, and I went and brusquely requested him to cease. I felt worried about it afterwards. And then, most unfortunately, I absolutely insulted the same patient a few days later, when I *didn't* intend to, and that's a terrible business of which I have dreamt a dozen times since it happened."

"Do tell us about it!" begged Nancy, her eyes wide with interest.

Shirley gave her sudden smile.

"If I do, the sharpest edge of my shame must be wearing off," she said, "for it has been simply too painful to talk about before. But confession is good for the soul, perhaps, so I believe I'll unburden mine." And humorously she told the tale.

"That man must have been a great, stupid, careless fellow!" declared Nancy indignantly. "I'm glad he heard what you said about him!"

"So'm I," put in Chris. "Served him right."

"I, too, think he deserved to hear a few hard words about himself," said Vieve.

"You are biassed in my favour, and you're trying to comfort me," said Shirley. "I have been so ashamed of myself and of my temper ever since. My only comfort is that my image will be pretty hazy in his remembrance by now, and soon blotted out altogether."

But Fate is a dame with an artistic sense of humour, which, occasionally, in her lighter moments, it pleases her to indulge.

Shirley would have been extremely vexed had she known of a little circumstance which happened two days later.

"Chris and I are sending you a snapshot of us, sitting on Mrs. Chester's lawn," wrote Nancy to Adam Deering. "We thought you would like to know what we are like, and you can tell us if we look at all familiar to you. I hope we do. Our new music-teacher, Miss Kayle, is sitting between us in the photo."

"And I'm glad she is," said Nancy to Chris, "because I'm sure you've only to look at Miss Kayle's face to see that *she* isn't false and heartless and worldly. Even this little snap might do something, Chris, to show him that all girls are not like Miss Kenning."

So that week there went out across the

sea, addressed to Sergeant Adam Deering, a very clear and characteristic little portrait of Shirley Kayle, who congratulated herself that her image, by this time, had grown hazy in Adam Deering's remembrance.

CHAPTER XIV

MAIL DAY

GENEVIEVE'S pretty maidservant stood in the kitchen doorway, scornfully regarding a big billy-can, filled with blackberries, on the step at her feet.

They were large blackberries, ripe blackberries, and, had she deigned to taste them, she would have found that they were also juicy and sweet. But Mattie did not taste them, and, as she gingerly picked up the can, and took it into the kitchen, she muttered :

"I've a good mind to pitch them straight into the garbage box."

When Vieve came into the kitchen after breakfast, and asked a surprised question regarding the gleaming black fruit, it was with a toss of the head, and in a hard tone of voice, that Mattie answered her.

"Found them on the doorstep first thing this morning," she said. "It's that Bert Benson. He must have sneaked in late last night and put them there; he said he'd be bringing some along, but I'm sure he might have saved himself the trouble."

"Why, Mattie?" asked Vieve, smiling.
"Don't you like blackberries?"

"I'm very partial to them, Mrs. Chester," returned the haughty damsel. "That's why. He thinks he'll get round me that way, I suppose."

"They are magnificent blackberries," said Vieve.

"Magnificent enough," conceded Mattie grimly. "But I'd think a bit more of *his* magnificence if he'd go getting some training for himself at Liverpool Camp instead of blackberries for me in the bush. I can do without his blackberries."

"Oh," said Vieve, "is that it?"

"Yes, and he knows it," the girl burst out. "We—we had words about it the other night. He said he wasn't in any hurry to get shot, and he was too civilised to want to go and kill any of his fellow-creatures, so he thought he'd leave it to the chaps who liked that sort of adventure, and stay at home and marry me. The cool cheek of him! It made my blood boil. Him to talk like that to a girl whose own brother is away fighting—and as gentle and tender-hearted a boy as ever breathed, too. Well, I told Bert that I never wanted to see his face again, until he'd done something to prove he had a spark of manliness in him. And he got in a huff at that, and said, 'All right, you won't, either,' and went off without so

much as saying good-night. And—and I thought he meant to enlist next morning—he sounded so desperate—and I was feeling a bit regretful-like, for fear I'd spoken too harsh. But after all, this is the sneaking, poor-spirited way he tries to make up!" She pointed contemptuously to the blackberries, and said she wished she had spoken even more of her mind to Mr. Benson, while the opportunity had been hers.

Vieve was properly sympathetic. For some time past, Mattie had made her mistress the confidante of her numerous love affairs, and Vieve recognised that it was a keen humiliation to the girl to discover that the suitor whom she had lately been most inclined to favour was proving so selfish and spineless a pacifist.

But she did not linger in the kitchen so long as Mattie had hoped she would this morning. For this was an Egyptian mail day, and, truth to tell, she had no thought for anything but the coming of the postman. She was out at the gate of the bungalow, waiting eagerly and anxiously, when his whistle was yet faint in the distance, and long before he had turned the corner of the street.

Gilbert Mason saw her there, as he passed the bungalow on his way to school. Vieve would have smiled at him, and bidden him good-morning, if he had given her the chance,

but he had no intention of encouraging her friendly advances.

The two children had gone back to their own home five weeks before. Gilbert had consented to make Nancy's acquaintance the day after his strategical retreat to the bush, persuaded into the heroic encounter by his father. And at the end of the fortnight, he was a much more self-possessed, perhaps a slightly patronising, friend of the two little girls, but as gently humouring and full of admiration of them as at first.

And he had entirely ceased to read girls' books !

He had seen the children once since their holiday, when they had come one Saturday afternoon with their mother to the brown bungalow, and had gone next door for a while according to Chris's promise. They had tried to prevail upon him then, at Mrs. Chester's invitation, to come back with them and play tennis, but he steadfastly declined to do so. Nancy and Chris were nice little kids, but he wasn't going to plunge into a vortex of feminine society, he told himself rather agitatedly.

So he was always very careful to avoid Mrs. Chester's friendly eyes. But although he did not wish to make her acquaintance, he felt quite kindly disposed towards her. He would have liked the satisfaction of knowing that she had received the soldier's

letter, for which he knew she was waiting this morning. At the corner he turned and saw the postman handing Mrs. Chester a letter—and obviously it was *the* letter, for she ran so eagerly into the house with it; and Gilbert went on his schoolward way whistling triumphantly.

The Egyptian mail had made Nancy and Chris late for school, too. By it had come the usual bright letters from their father, hard at work in hospital at Ghezireh, a postcard from David Chester, and—their first, long-awaited, long-dreamed-of letter from Adam Deering!

They took it out to the garden to read, their faces pink, and their hearts thumping with excitement, leaving their mother engrossed over their father's mail.

It was a short letter. Adam only said, heartily, that it was awfully good of them to have written to him, and that he hoped they would keep it up, that he knew them very well by sight, of course, and, also of course, had often wished to make their acquaintance, but had never been game to speak to them without that introduction. He said he had met their friend Lieutenant Chester, and was sure he was a very fine fellow, and hoped to see a lot more of him. He added that the wind on the desert blew chill just then, that he would be proud to wear Nancy's socks when they arrived, and that he hoped

to send them some postcards by next mail.

Not a word was there in response to their own comments on the strangeness of life, its weariness, and its bitterness! No darkly reckless references to the joy of battle and its desperate chances! No gloomy or sardonically humorous remarks! Such a very ordinary letter! Such a practical, commonplace letter!

"But I think," said Nancy slowly, "when you come to read between the lines, Chris, there's a lot of weariness and sadness in it. Perhaps only he knew what an effort it was to write cheerfully. I am glad he has met Mr. Chester. I knew we could trust Mr. Chester to do what he could. Let's see now what *he* says!"

"Hulloa, you two!" said David. "Received your important letter regarding we know what. Went and saw we know whom yesterday—a fine fellow, as you say. Don't worry! Think he's recovering—had got your letters. Seemed quite cheered up and jolly. Keep on writing to him. Expect to see more of him. In haste, D. C."

Nancy shook her head.

"A *man* might be deceived by mirthless laughter and reckless gaiety," she said. "It would have jarred on us, I think. The mail closes to-morrow. We must write to him again."

CHAPTER XV

KEEPING ON

SHIRLEY stood in front of her mirror, and indulged in a prolonged survey of her own reflection.

"Pasty-faced little wretch!" she said disgustedly, at last.

She took a small china jar from one of her table drawers, brushed a finger over its contents, and applied it carefully, first to one cheek, then to the other, and critically eyed the result.

"Painted jade!" she said, after a few moments' silence.

Dispirited tears welled into her eyes then, and she bit her lip, and blinked them away, and, turning from the mirror, went on talking, as though it somehow helped to restore her self-control to treat herself, chidingly and pettingly, as somebody else.

"There, I didn't mean it, so you needn't cry! There's no harm in a painted face, anyway. It stops you looking so abominably pathetic!—I won't look pathetic!" she added in a stormy whisper.

Her lips trembled here, and tears came

again into her eyes. So she compelled herself to stand in front of her mirror once more, and watch them roll down her cheeks. It was a brutal, but effective method of checking a hundred others that were gathering to follow the first. She dried them away before they reached her chin, stared herself into countenance again, and resolutely smiled. "What you're always wanting to cry for I don't know!" she muttered.

It couldn't be that she was ill, or about to get ill, she argued with herself; she had never been ill in her life, and there seemed nothing definite the matter with her now. Of course, the heat made everyone feel rather languid and disinclined for work, but if everyone were to give way to the feeling, the wheels of national life would cease to turn, and chaos and want and ruin would be the result!

It was an essential rule to follow, such a simple rule, too, that which she had laid down for herself some weeks before, and practised ever since—never to heed her own complaints, never to permit herself to shirk or postpone a single duty, and so to keep the house and its people undeserving of such a reproach as Angus had brought against them one evening.

Her sisters sighed and smiled over her "fussiness," as usual, deprecating it and humouring it by turns, but she had tried

hard, lately, to refrain from the appearance of "fussing," however much she had planned and worried in secret, so the family did not realise how much she accomplished in the home. She had a wholesome dread of becoming a harassed nagger.

Since the new year, Rene had been more than usually unobservant and uncaring of all matters outside her own work. Some quaint calendars and Christmas cards of her own designing, which she had succeeded in placing in a popular city shop, had attracted the notice of a publisher who was on the look-out for an artist to illustrate, whimsically and poetically, a book of bush fairy stories he was producing. The result was that Rene had been approached, and commissioned to try what she could do, and now she was working in every spare moment to complete the set of pictures, with the first of which the publisher had already expressed his satisfaction.

Certainly at this time Rene took no thought of what she should eat or drink, and she was entirely without regard for her raiment. What Rene put on, and how she put it on, was a matter of sore affliction to Shirley and Phyllis in these days.

It was Saturday morning, and Phyllis, out in the kitchen, was baking scones to please Shirley, because Mrs. Chester was coming to Bushy Lodge that afternoon.

It was Vieve's first visit to the Kayles', and as Shirley led the way through the house to the garden beyond, Vieve thought what a pleasant old home it was, and what a charm of mellow reposefulness lay upon the big, old-fashioned rooms, with their dark polished floors, and their rose-filled vases, and bowls of young red gum leaves.

"What a *lovely* old garden!" she exclaimed enthusiastically, as, introductions to Rene and Phyl over, she seated herself in one of the chairs that were placed under the Moreton Bay fig-tree—the giant of the property. "Mine won't be nearly such an attractive garden, on a hot day, for years. There's certainly a charm about an old home that a new one can't possess."

"You have too many compensations to stand in need of sympathy," laughed Shirley. "It's such a terrible tangle of a garden, this. The boys could easily do something with it too, if they would, but I'm partial to its big trees myself."

Rene's eyes lingered, in a fascinated way, upon the visitor, leaning back among the cushions in one of the old wicker chairs. Vieve had a picturesque type of beauty, and an unconscious knack of falling into graceful attitudes which the young artist recognised with an instant yearning for a pencil and her sketch-book.

"Don't say I didn't warn you of this,

Mrs. Chester!" said Shirley. "Only I did expect she would have the decency to wait about a quarter of an hour before beginning work."

"*Work*, mark you, and on Saturday afternoon, the worker's half-holiday, too!" said Phyllis. She was sitting on a rug that was spread under the tree, nibbling a grass blade, and looking from one to another of them, as they talked, out of narrowed, smiling eyes—a charming picture of summer laziness.

"I'm the only rational girl in this family, Mrs. Chester," she added, "for these other two live in a wearisome whirl of bustle and toil from morning till night. Look at me, though—a model of intelligent and unstodgy reposefulness. We're a family born to specialise, so I am seriously thinking of affixing yet another brass plate to our already overburdened fence, and taking up the inculcation of the art of reposefulness for my profession, because I'm convinced there ought to be more of me roving through the world, as a wholesome influence upon all the unquiet, strenuous people such as I have about me. It becomes an increasing strain to live with them. Rene does nothing but paint and draw from morning till night——"

"And Shirley to play the violin?" suggested Vieve, as Phyllis paused.

"Don't I, though?" cried Shirley.

"Yes, that's the trouble," said Phyllis.

"Shirley is an infinitely worse case than Rene. When she leaves off playing the violin or piano it's always to do something else—polish a bath tap, perhaps, and she leaves the tap to make a frock, and, hastily donning the frock, she tears off to give a music-lesson, never pausing for a moment till she climbs into bed at night, and begins her dreaming operations."

Shirley smiled, with a little chin-quiver that no one observed, and aimed a fallen fig at her sister.

"You've proved that I'm not to be numbered with the family specialists, anyhow," she said, "for I sometimes get as much satisfaction in bringing golden lustre to the bath tap as in playing a concerto decently."

Vieve was thinking that Shirley looked more than usually frail and large-eyed to-day, despite the colour in her cheeks, the origin of which, for the first time, she suspected.

"Relaxation is a very good habit to acquire, Shirley," she said seriously, "and it's a habit which I'm inclined to believe you haven't yet formed."

"Nonsense," retorted Shirley rather sharply. "I'm just as naturally inclined to be lazy as anyone else."

"I can't bear it," she was thinking, greatly and unreasonably hurt, "if the very visitors are going to lecture me about

my fussiness. Why don't they leave me alone?"

She seized upon the opportunity of getting away by herself afforded her by going up to the house to make afternoon tea. She had been battling more and more desperately, for almost an hour, with that unaccountable desire to cry, and she felt she could master it more easily if left to herself for a while.

She entered the kitchen with a listless step, filled the kettle, set it on the gas stove, and, sinking into a chair by the table, suddenly buried her face in her hands.

"Oh, God, I'm so tired!" she sobbed. "I'm so tired! I'm so tired!"

The water boiled over presently, with a startling splutter, and she jumped up in a fright, with a fast-beating heart, to make the tea.

But the floor rocked, and the room went dark, and she sank back into her chair with white lips.

She did not quite faint, for she went on thinking, in the dim, detailed way that belongs to a certain phase of semi-consciousness.

"That's the kettle," she thought—"the kettle, and it's boiling over, and that's the war-map on the wall, and there's the spot of butter that spurted on Italy, when I was making omelettes."

She noted these things with a queer feeling of detachment from them—she felt so terribly

remote that it seemed impossible for her ever to come back to her old association with them. She had lost hold—she was slipping out——

“I must have been ill, after all, to be dying now,” she thought.

She did not know whether she had been sitting there half an hour or only half a minute longer, when Phyllis entered, and she looked up.

“I feel horribly queer, Phyl,” she said.

In a few moments Phyllis, much alarmed, had brought eau-de-cologne, smelling salts, and sal volatile, and was administering them with many endearing words.

“You *will* work like a cart-horse!” she said reproachfully, as soon as Shirley seemed restored. “Just as if Mrs. Chester would be going down on her knees, peering into all the corners for specks of dust, and looking for tarnish on the silver! If she *is* that kind, she must be a horrible woman, and I hate her, and we don’t want her here at all!”

Shirley became propitiatory at once.

“I did hardly any work on her account,” she said. “And besides, I only half fainted. Lots of people faint properly, quite often, and it’s not considered very serious. I think I’m hungry—that’s what’s the matter. I couldn’t eat any lunch, somehow or other. But I’m all right now, and I’m going to have some tea, and then I’ll be better still.

Don't tell Mrs. Chester, Phyl. It would make me feel such a self-conscious fool. Hurry up with the tea—it's nearly half-past four."

She went valiantly across the grass to the fig-tree, carrying the wicker cake-stand.

"I'm quite well," she was saying all the way—"only a bit shaky for want of something to eat."

Phyllis came after, with the heavy tea-tray.

"Of course, if she *will* go without lunch," she was thinking uneasily, "it's no wonder she gets faint. And I did help this morning! All those scones I made! And went up to the shop for the cakes and things. And ironed my dress, and Shirley's too."

The boys were home by six, from a cricket match at which Angus had been playing, and Peter and Bobby looking on. They entertained Vieve on the side verandah while Rene and Phyllis got dinner ready, and Shirley, with a little anxious demon of fussing in her mind, went from kitchen to dining-room superintending the preparations in which they refused to allow her to participate.

Vieve thoroughly enjoyed her visit to Bushy Lodge; yet, as she journeyed homewards, she felt depressed.

It was clear to her that Shirley was not herself; she had been unusually quiet early

in the afternoon, but later had sparkled and chattered, with a fascinating but rather unnatural gaiety, which had in it, Vieve thought, something oddly defiant.

But how she had played! Vieve thrilled at the memory of the after-dinner music in that worn old living-room; such fire and sweetness, such utter sadness and sudden freakish laughter Shirley had called from her violin and put into the hearts of her listeners—one more listener than she guessed at, for she did not give a thought to her father, alone out on the verandah, smoking, letting his pipe go out sometimes in the concentration of his listening.

"When I grow up," Bobby had said reflectively, at the close of one of Shirley's performances, "I'm going to marry a girl who can cook and play the violin."

"Ah, it's easy to make plans!" Peter told him. "Mind, I don't say I haven't got my own; but whether they'll be fulfilled or not is another matter."

Angus had walked with Vieve to her tram, and on the way they had spoken of Shirley and her gift of music, and Vieve had been surprised by the earnestness of the boy's tone, and the bitterness of his words.

"Rene and Phyl don't stand in the way of her working up to the perfection of Bob's ideal," he remarked. "She could cook, and play the violin, and do all the work of the

house besides, before they'd lift a finger to stop her! My word, those two have a tough conscience! So have we all, for that matter!"

The tram came along as he finished speaking, and Vieve carried away with her the remembrance of his worried expression, and the sudden smile, like Shirley's, which had banished it for a moment as he bade her good-night.

And she went home feeling vaguely troubled on account of the Kayles, and more than usually troubled, since the mood of troubling was upon her, for David, far across the sea and the desert, in the Empire's active service.

She walked from the station to the bungalow, in a mood of sad and deep abstraction, random strains of the music Shirley had played to-night drifting through her brain, colouring, and agitating, and intensifying her thoughts and emotions.

She did not notice a figure walking behind her, a stealthy figure, that kept in the shadow of the fences, and followed her every step of the way from the station to the street where the lights of the brown bungalow shone out upon the road.

CHAPTER XVI

" MEA CULPA "

AFTER a good deal of advertising and answering of advertisements, after many telephonings to registry offices and a series of disappointments, Shirley, upon whom the responsibility of making such arrangements usually devolved, had, some weeks ago, secured the services of a laundress and char-woman who promised to be a long-continued success at Bushy Lodge.

A small, stout, hardy woman was Mrs. Mullins, who performed her work with marvellous despatch, and yet exceedingly well. Moreover, she did not eat soap, and starch, and blue, as Shirley averred some of the women must do—she could not otherwise account for the wholesale disappearance of these articles on washing days.

Every Monday morning Mrs. Mullins came to wash, every Thursday to house-clean. But here was Monday morning, two days after Vieve's visit to Bushy Lodge; and here was eight o'clock, and half-past eight, and not yet Mrs. Mullins.

At nine o'clock their worst fears were

confirmed. A small girl, plainly bursting with excitement, came to the kitchen door with a letter in her hand.

"From Mrs. Mullins?" asked Shirley, as she accepted the letter.

"No," said the small girl, with enjoyment. "From Mrs. Brown."

"And who is Mrs. Brown?" queried Shirley, and she opened the letter to find out.

"DEAR MISS," had written Mrs. Brown; "Please excuse me, but I was married on Friday morning not intending to, but Mr. Brown he has such a way with him. I would gladly come to you to-day and see you through this week at least but Mr. Brown he says he's not going to have his wife going out washing for capitalists. Not that he has any grudge against you for he does not know you and I've argued with him right up to the last minute I have indeed but he's that unreasonable and you know what they are. Hoping you'll soon be suited. I wouldn't try to do it myself if I was you. Your that little anyone could break you in half easy I could myself.

"Yours truly,

"MRS. BROWN—MRS. MULLINS that was.

"P.S.—Any time you're passing would be glad for you to drop in and have a cup of

tea at above address and so would Mr. Brown for he don't bear you no grudge for all the way he goes on about the lazy loafing capitalists in their silks and their satins you don't have to take any notice of him its only his way."

Shirley folded the letter, controlled her mouth-corners with difficulty, and spoke severely to the waiting small girl.

"Tell Mrs. Mullins that was," she said, "that herself she *has* broken me. Tell her I shall be obliged to tackle that washing myself, and that there are two bedspreads in the copper."

Shirley was giving a music-lesson during the morning when Phyllis, after answering a telephone summons, came to her with sparkling eyes.

"Got another washerwoman?" asked Shirley hopefully.

"No—something better. It was Mrs. Brook, to say Freddie had just arrived home from camp on final leave, and would you and Rene and I have dinner in town with them this evening, and go to the theatre afterwards. Freddie engaged a box at Her Majesty's on his way home. She's waiting for our answer, but it's only a matter of form asking you, of course."

"No," said Shirley, "I won't go. I'm too tired. I simply couldn't sit it out. I

couldn't sleep last night, and I'm going to bed early."

"But Freddie will be awfully disappointed if you don't go!" exclaimed Phyllis.

"I can't help it," said Shirley, with queer doggedness. "I'm going to bed early."

Rene and Phyllis had left home when Shirley reached it that evening.

Mr. Kayle and the younger boys had already dined, and were out in the garden, and Angus was not yet home. So Shirley sat down in solitude to her dinner.

The girls had left it in readiness for her, but she sat for a long time without tasting it, listening to the high-pitched humming of the mosquitoes in the darkening room, and the shouts of Peter and Bobby, and the next-door boys, who were playing in the garden.

At last she broke off a morsel of bread, and put it between her lips. But the effort of swallowing it was too great to be repeated.

She remained apathetically looking out at the garden tree-tops that the verandah doorway framed—dark tree-tops, moving gently beneath a blue-white evening sky. When Angus came in, she did not even turn her head.

"Halloa," he said, "where's everybody?"

She waited for a few moments before answering him, and in the interval he lit the gas.

“ The girls have gone to the theatre,” she said.

“ Who’s taking them ? ”

“ The Brooks,” she replied, after a yet longer interval of silence.

“ What’s the matter, Shirley ? ” He was looking anxiously into her face, his hand on her shoulder.

“ The matter ? ” she echoed dully.

“ Yes ; are you ill, or something ? ”

“ Ill ? ” she repeated, in the same vague tone, and then suddenly she roused herself, and smiled at him.

“ Of course I’m not ill,” she said. “ Come and have your dinner, my dear.”

But he looked at her with covert anxiety from time to time as he ate. Something was wrong, he knew—she was either ill or in trouble ; she had looked ill for days, but he did not know how to deal with and mend the matter, and so maintained the silence for which she seemed inclined.

He went away presently, to make himself some coffee. She had not as usual made it for him. When he came back, she was sitting with her head bowed upon her arms.

“ Look here, old girl,” he said, “ you’re knocked up. Go and have a good sleep, and then you’ll feel better. I’ll wash up.”

“ A good sleep,” she repeated softly. “ Do you think I could sleep if I were to go to bed now ? ”

He patted her shoulder, and fell naturally, and without comment, into a tone of gentle humouring, as though she were a child.

"Rather," he answered. "I'll make the kids keep quiet. Come on."

She held out her hand to him, and he took it, and led her off up the hall to her room, and when she sat down wearily in a chair there, he took off her shoes and her brooch and unpinned her hair.

Then he turned down her bed-clothes, unfolded her beribboned nightgown, and shook her gently by the shoulder.

"Go on, get your things off," he said encouragingly. "Call me when you're ready, and I'll come and turn your light out."

He went back to the dining-room, and set to work to clear the table, his face graver and more wistful-looking than ever, and a queer, oppressed sense of loneliness and disaster upon him.

She was in bed when he returned to her room, lying with her eyes open, staring at the door. But she had not called him.

"There's something I'm trying to remember, Angus," she said. "But I can't for the life of me think what it is."

"Let it rip then," said he.

"I can't do that," she retorted impatiently. "It was something I had to do, you know. Tell me some of the things I do, Angus."

She was looking at him so eagerly and anxiously, and her eyes were unnaturally bright. Dark lines were under them, and a sudden sharp realisation of the smallness of her face gave him an abrupt shock. He glanced from it to her two thin little hands.

"Tell me some of the things I do!" she cried, a worried crinkle in her brow. A lump rose in his throat that he had to swallow, before he could answer her.

"Why, you poor kid, you do *everything*!" he exclaimed in a husky voice. "And you're so little, you shouldn't ever do anything but play."

"Somebody else told me that," she said eagerly. "Somebody told me she could break me in half—I was so thin. That was Mrs. Brown!—I know! I've got it! It was washing day I wanted to think of. I'll have to get up at six o'clock to-morrow, Angus. Set the alarm for six o'clock, and put it in the dining-room. If I once go to sleep, I mightn't wake at six, and the others won't after being at the theatre."

"You're not going to do any washing," he said fiercely. "You're tired out—that's what is the matter with you."

"Tired out," she agreed. "But it's no use giving in, you know. The only thing is to keep going, no matter how you feel. You drift into such slip-shod ways if you allow yourself to neglect work. You get to

live in such an anyhow fashion. You said so yourself, and I've never forgotten it."

The words struck him like a lash. But there was no accusation in the tone of her voice, or in the expression of the brilliant eyes gazing into his. So far as she was concerned, she was only quoting words of wisdom to prove her case.

"Shirley," he cried. "Shirley, I didn't say that at *you*! It was at the others, because they shouldered so much on to you—the selfish beggars!"

She burst into tears at his words, and he had to retract them in order to quieten her.

She lay with the same troubled frown on her face when he left her, thinking of the long, difficult day that was over. She had given her morning music-lessons mechanically, and she could not quite remember which of her pupils had been at the house; she had played through the long afternoon at Fall's like one in a dream. And now it was evening, and she was in bed—in bed, though it was only seven o'clock. She counted the strokes as they chimed in the hall, and went on counting up to seven for a while, until her attention became absorbed by the multi-coloured, glowing shapes that grew out of the darkness and faded again—triangles and squares, circles and spiky stars, widening and contracting, crowding upon her from all sides, and drifting away again. She tried

to beat them away once, when they seemed to be pressing too close, and then became conscious of another magical happening which made her forget the troublesome coloured things : her hands were enormous—giant wrists, huge knuckles, and fingers like tree saplings. She was terrified of them—they lay so near to her face ; but try as she would, she could not lift them, so heavy had they become.

And then, out of the darkness, there floated towards her a huge hat—a hat as big as an umbrella, with a scarlet veil attached, a hat loaded with berries and feathers, flowers and ribbons, in all the colours of the rainbow.

She laughed helplessly.

“ I must be nearly asleep,” she thought, “ to be thinking of such silly things.”

But the next moment, the hat had descended upon her head, crushing her under its weight. More and more closely it pressed, a hard hat, with pricking ends of straw, an awful heaviness that hurt her head, and turned its dull aching to an acute pain.

When Rene and Phyllis reached home, she was delirious, with her father and the three boys standing in an alarmed semi-circle about her bed.

She rambled, with short intervals of silence and lucidity, all night. Towards dawn they thought she had fallen asleep.

But when the clock struck six, she started up wildly, and was on her feet before anyone could reach her.

"Washing day," she said, and fainted in Phyl's arms.

When Doctor Deering came, at ten o'clock, she was conscious, lying still with closed eyes, and the little pucker in her forehead which told of an ache still there.

"Well," said he, taking her hand, "what do you mean by all this, eh?"

"Nothing," she answered sullenly. "I only want to be let alone. I told them not to send for a doctor," she went on in an excited tone, and suddenly beginning to cry. "Oh, dear, I know what it will be—he'll pretend I'm ill, and I haven't *time* to be ill, and he'll keep on asking me millions and millions of questions, and I can't be bothered answering them. I'm too tired."

"Pooh!" said he. "I'm only old Bill Deering, and I don't want to ask you anything. I don't care *that* for all your bullying, either."

She was silent for a moment. Then she sighed.

"I'm a horrid little beast, I know," she said, "but I can't help it. And I'm not ill—I've only got a headache for want of sleep, so there!"

"Is that all?" said he. "Quite a simple matter to fix up, then."

But to the others he told a different story.

“Brain fag, body fag, nerve fag—that’s what’s the matter with her,” he pronounced in a severe tone. “What on earth have you been thinking of, to let her get into such a state?”

“She never complained,” said Mr. Kayle unhappily. “She never complained, did she, girls?”

“Never complained! But, good heavens, couldn’t you *see* she was overtaxing her strength?”

“I didn’t know,” replied Mr. Kayle. “I imagined she was just healthily occupied in her musical work.”

“Well, she’s on the verge of brain fever, anyhow,” said the doctor. “This is a complete nervous breakdown. She has probably been battling against it for months—that’s what makes it a bad one—and it will take months, I think, to build her up again. She must have a long, complete rest-cure—no work, no worry, no exertion at all for a while. She’ll have to learn to be lazy, to spend her days in a hammock, reading fairy-tales. She’ll want dainty, tempting meals, and gallons of milk, and pleasant faces about her.”

When he had gone, Rene and Phyllis turned to each other with dismayed faces.

“Poor little Shirley,” said Rene, “we

never should have let her work so hard. We must have been frightfully unobservant not to have noticed how really ill she was, although she has never admitted it or complained."

Phyllis only nodded, and left the room.

There was a stricken look upon her face, and from the turmoil of her miserable heart, a passionate prayer went up to God.

"Punish *me* for this! Punish *me*! Heap punishment upon me! It's all my fault! I ought to be horsewhipped and starved. Punish me!"

CHAPTER XVII

MAKING AMENDS

BUT there were six troubled consciences, all told, at Bushy Lodge that day, because of Shirley's breakdown.

Rene and the three boys unburdened their hearts to each other as they sat at dinner (which was really only tea that evening), Shirley being still asleep under the influence of a draught Doctor Deering had ordered for her. But the remaining two nursed their remorse in silence, and with all the more bitterness.

No one save Phyllis had paid much attention to Mr. Kayle that day. After the doctor had gone in the morning, he had addressed a few questions to Rene in his usual peevish manner.

Had it been really necessary for Shirley to overwork? Were they so short of money? Hadn't he been giving them enough to manage on, and provide themselves with domestic help if they had needed it?

"Not quite," said Rene drily, in answer to the last query. There was mild scathing in her voice, because his tone had suggested

that he considered it very bad management on Shirley's part to get ill, and a further proof of bad management that the money he had given them for household expenses from time to time had not supplied more of the needs he expected it to meet.

He made no rejoinder to this, and she left him "to fret over the family capacity for spending," she told herself, with the rare irritability that possessed her to-day.

"If only I had taken more of the responsibility of management upon me!" she said to the others at dinner. "I've always left it to Shirley because she is more capable than I, but, with practice, *I* might have become capable too, and of course it wasn't any more interesting or pleasant for her than it would have been for me, to bother over housekeeping arrangements and to think out ways and means—especially such tangled ways and straitened means as ours are."

The last remark was not aimed at her father, for, though he sat in his place at the table, it did not even occur to her that he would take note of what she said; it was not his usual way to pay any attention to their conversation.

Angus's chief cause of regret was that a criticism of his had been the means of increasing Shirley's anxieties, and her daily output of energy. It was such a weight upon his soul that he told them of it now.

"She's such a willing, anxious, generous little thing, and cares too much about pleasing us," he continued. "What I said that evening stuck in her mind, though I hardly gave it another thought—and she's been straining every nerve, since then, to keep things up to a good standard. I ought to have been shot for going whining to her."

"She's always been afraid I'd get into gaol for picking peaches an' things," Bobby said mournfully. "Of course, I knew I wouldn't, 'cause I'm a bit too sharp for that, but you couldn't make *her* see it that way, an' I s'pose she's been lyin' awake at nights, worrying and worrying over *that*. An' I tore me trousers the other evening, getting over Slade's fence, an' *she* had to mend 'em."

Here, indeed, was a fine opening for Phyllis to take up the cudgels against herself—to declare that the mending of the boys' clothes should have been her own particular task, and to make resolutions for future darning and mending hours; but she sat silent, with impassive face and inattentive demeanour, and Mr. Kayle leaving the table at this point, after a mere pretence of eating, Phyllis went too.

But the others remained in their places, continuing to "acknowledge and bewail" their manifold sins of omission.

"However," said Rene, "I'll be the house-keeper in future, if I ruin us all in the

attempt; and, of course, she must give up Fall's and her pupils for three months at least."

"Where's the money for that coming from, I wonder?" said Peter. "Shirley's a girl who likes to make herself look nice; you're not very stylish yourself, you see, Rene; but Shirley must have a new hat now and then, and ribbons showing through her blouses, and all that sort of thing."

"She shall have her pretty clothes without drudgery," declared Rene.

As she spoke, she mentally renounced, without an instant's hesitation, every guinea she had striven so hard to put aside, wherewith to purchase the further education in her art that she craved. For she knew it would take a good deal of money to make up Shirley's contribution to the housekeeping fund, and some pocket-money besides.

Vieve dined hastily in town that evening, and was out at Bushy Lodge by seven o'clock, by which time also Shirley was awake, and had had some tea. She saw Vieve for a few minutes, and very anxiously demanded the news of the day.

"I gave quite a nice little concert all by myself," Vieve told her, "in a panic of nervousness though I was, without your support. But we've arranged for someone to take your place to-morrow—for three months, indeed, if necessary—a friend of

mine, Bertha Loan; she's a very nice player, but not a patch on you. Mr. Fall was so sorry and dismayed about your being ill, and several people came up to the platform, with disappointed faces, to ask me why you were not there."

"That's nice to know," said Shirley. "Oh, well, I suppose if I'm lazy for about a week I'll be all right again, but do you know, I feel so helpless and foggy to-day, that I don't believe I could play a scale, or walk as far as the tram, to save my life."

Bobby cleaned the brass plates by moonlight that evening.

"I mightn't have time before school to-morrow," said he, "and I'm never going to miss doin' them any more."

Out in the woodshed, by the flickering light of a candle, Peter plucked and dressed a fowl he had killed, to be boiled down for broth, while Bobby, having finished the brass plates, read aloud one after another of the recipes devoted to invalid dishes in the family cookery book.

"I'll have a go at some of them myself," Peter remarked. "We can't leave her to those girls, Bob. Rene has no ideas beyond cups of tea, and Phyl would go shoving any old ready-made thing out of a tin at her."

Phyllis was in the detached laundry, with a kerosene lamp, her sleeves rolled up above

the elbows, her frock drenched with scattered soapsuds, engaged upon the washing which Mrs. Brown, "not intending to," had left upon the family hands.

She was rinsing and blueing her first copper-full, when footsteps sounded on the gravel outside. She smiled, but not graciously, to hear them.

"If anybody comes here, offering to help me," she said to herself, "they can just go away again, that's all. I'll do this washing alone, if I have to throw water over people to keep them away."

The footsteps stopped at the door, and Phyllis turned her head, without stopping in her work of putting a sheet through the wringer.

It was Mr. Kayle who stood looking in upon her, and the forbidding expression passed from her face at sight of him.

"You must find it rather hard work, turning that affair," he remarked, after watching her in silence for a minute or two.

She dashed a little shirt of Bobby's through the blue, marvelling that he should be so much aware of what she was doing.

"It does rather take it out of you," she answered in a satisfied tone.

"Suppose I—er—turn it for you?" he suggested.

For the space of a moment's complete

cessation from work she stood looking at him, and then held out her little wet hand to him in welcome.

"That's very kind of you, Father dear," she said heartily.

So he came in, and removed his coat, and the two worked in silence for a few moments.

But the thoughts of both were as busy as their hands.

When Doctor Deering had spoken so forcibly, that morning, of the long strain of overwork and worry which had caused Shirley's illness, Phyllis had observed the peculiar startled expression, as of awakening, that had come to her father's face. Phyllis also, and again only Phyllis, had been aware of the subtle difference in him at the dinner-table that evening. His silence had been no longer one of abstraction, but queerly attentive.

She glanced at him searchingly, yet furtively, as she fed the wringer with dripping clothes for him to churn into the basket.

The relations between this father and his children were so very odd. There was a mere surface acquaintance between them; they accepted his fretful, uninterested, unhelpful, and yet forbearing, treatment of them, without grudge or criticism, and met it with good-humour and patience, and a thoughtless, airy kindliness. Beyond this outer, familiar wall, neither he nor they had

ever tried to penetrate to the complexities within.

And now Phyllis longed to penetrate.

"I had no idea," he observed abruptly, after a while, "that the girl was overworking."

"It's my fault," Phyllis told him emphatically—"my fault—all mine, Father!"

"Your fault?" he echoed. "How is that?"

"If I had done all the housework, she wouldn't have broken down like this. Both Rene and Shirley have enough to do without touching the house. Rene has been sensible, and stuck to her painting and her pupils, but Shirley, with her pupils and her practising and her afternoons at Fall's, has been struggling to be housekeeper, and often housemaid too. And I've let her struggle! Isn't it shameful? I've let her! Where I should have done everything, I've done only about half the work, and pretended that it didn't matter to let the rest go."

She went on pouring out the tale of her shortcomings, her days of ignominious shirking, and careless performance of necessary tasks, in a torrent of self-reproach. He ceased work to listen, with an expression of startled dismay upon his face, but, save for a moment now and then, when she paused to spread out her arms or wave a hand in eloquent gesticulation, as she talked, she went on rinsing clothes, tossing them into

the blue, and then putting them through the wringer at which he had, temporarily at least, suspended operations.

"But," he said at last, "but——" He looked at her young, unhappy face, her slight figure, as she hauled and strained at one of the two quilts in the rinsing-water. For the first time in many years he was realising and facing practical facts, and he found it a very disturbing business indeed.

"But——" he said again, after a long pause between his first two "buts" and his third, which Phyllis had filled with further testimonies against herself, "but surely the management and work of such a large household as this would be too big an undertaking for a young girl like you, without a good deal of assistance. Let me see—how old are you—er—Phyllis?"

"Seventeen!" she flung at him. "Seventeen! Seventeen years have I lived, Father, and accomplished nothing—nothing, in seventeen years!"

"Seventeen?" he repeated thoughtfully, and ignored the rest of her speech. It was when she was seventeen that he had first come to know Mary, her exquisite mother, living the luxurious, sheltered life of her girlhood, in the home of her wealthy parents. Two years later she had come to grace a small, dainty home with him, tossing her leisured girlhood behind her with a careless laugh,

and entering eagerly upon the new life, and all that it brought her, through the years of care and work.

The first years of it had been easy enough, though, and, without ever being rich, they had always had enough money in her lifetime to make overwork and drudgery unnecessary.

"Seventeen!" he said, and looked with pained eyes at Mary's slim daughter, seventeen years old, toiling over a wash-tub.

"You are very like your mother when she was your age," he told her abruptly. "And yet unlike."

"Like in colouring and features, perhaps, but quite unlike in character, I think," said Phyllis. "Shirley is like Mother in that respect, and I—am like—you!"

He turned that startled look upon her again.

"Ah, God help you!" he exclaimed, almost under his breath, and turned and left her.

CHAPTER XVIII

" WE TWO "

It was twelve o'clock when Phyllis at last came out of the laundry, and locked the door for the safety of the big basket, piled high with clothes, ready to hang out in the morning sunlight.

Rene had been out once during the evening with an offer of assistance, and had been sent away, laughing, with water shining on her hair.

Phyllis crept wearily into the silent house, took off her shoes in the kitchen, and went up the hall to Rene's bedroom, where a light burned dimly. It was here that she was to sleep, so that she might not disturb Shirley when she came to bed.

The rest of the house was in darkness, except for her father's room, which was brightly lit.

She hesitated for a moment, then tiptoed up the hall to his door; he was not in the room, and she entered and cast a quick glance around. On the writing-table by the window lay a pile of photographs of her mother—the old portraits, taken at seventeen,

eighteen, nineteen, showing how like Shirley, at her happiest, was that girl of long ago.

She heard him pacing the verandah, beyond the open French window, and went out. He was not greatly taken aback at her sudden coming. He even felt that he was glad to have her with him. And Phyllis was thinking how they stood alone together, he and she, in this family of eager, self-reliant workers, and that, by joining hands in sympathy, they might somehow, even if desperately, win through.

"Father, do you hate being a dentist?" she asked him abruptly.

"I'm afraid I do," he answered hesitatingly. "When your mother was here, I didn't mind; it was just my work, my living—and——"

"And you did it, more or less cheerfully, though it was uncongenial," she rejoined swiftly; "you could even take a mild interest in it then, but—afterwards, you realised how uncongenial it was. Father," she went on earnestly, "I *wish* you would tell me what it was that you discovered you should have been—when it seemed too late, and your responsibilities too many, and your means too small, to alter your life."

She hung upon his answer.

But he shook his head hopelessly.

The brilliant gifts in art which his children

possessed were, latently, his gifts too. They did not know it. He did not know it himself. It was their mother's qualities of buoyant energy, confidence, and determination which, in the children, were to bring those paternal gifts to successful fruition. And besides—besides—he was painfully handicapped, had been handicapped for years, in a way that even Phyllis did not guess.

"Ah," he said, "I've had fancies—dreams." But his voice was dreary. "God knows what I was cut out for," he finished. "I think it was nothing."

"You never found out?" There was a note of fear in her level voice, but he did not catch it.

They paced up and down the verandah again in silence for a space.

"Father," she said at last, "we must help each other to work, we two. Try it, and see what happens. Teeth for you, Father, and housework for me. And Heaven help us both!" she added.

He smiled a little to himself over her tone of exalted self-sacrifice. He was not without the sense of humour of which his children possessed such an abundant share. But he made no comment on her words, only patted her shoulder, as though in acquiescence. She bade him good-night then, and went away, with her heart-ache, to bed. Yet in spite of the heart-ache, a triumphant sense

of achievement possessed her, and she could not sneer it away. For it was such a big pile of wet, clean clothes that waited in the laundry for the sunshine of to-morrow. And she had washed them all herself.

CHAPTER XIX

GETTING ACQUAINTED

BUT fortunately for Phyllis—and fortunately, perhaps, for the success of a large number of the valiant resolutions she had made—she was destined to meet with a great deal of opposition in the career of self-sacrifice upon which she had determined, and she was forced at last to modify her plans considerably. For, no sooner had she made up her mind to devote herself, henceforth and entirely, to the needs of her family, than that same strange family began to thwart her purpose at every turn.

Rene's housekeeping plans, and the good resolutions of the boys, had to be reckoned with, she found, much more than she had anticipated.

Mr. Kayle, though he was almost as silent as ever, was attending punctually to his professional appointments (though they were not very numerous, for his practice had been dwindling for years), and he certainly took a more active interest in his family. He had consulted Rene about the amount necessary

to defray household expenses, and told her he would supply her regularly with it. His habitually dreary, dreaming mind, lashed to activity by recent events, occupied itself with anxious pondering over all kinds of schemes for the redress of the wrong he had done his children, and, in particular, to Shirley, who had fallen so pitiably under burdens too heavy for her to bear.

"That other child will break down next," he often told himself gloomily, as his newly-seeing eyes watched Phyllis at her work, and he insisted upon another advertisement for a woman to do the heaviest duties of the house being sent to the morning newspaper offices.

But Rene was just writing it out one evening, when a most opportune and welcome visitor knocked at the back door.

It was Mrs. Brown, formerly Mrs. Mullins, who explained that Mr. Brown was out on strike, and had therefore consented to her returning for a time to her old occupation, so if the Kayles had no one else to suit them she would be very pleased to see them through for a week or two, at least.

As it turned out, Mr. Brown and his comrades stood haughtily aloof from *their* usual occupation for fully six weeks, and by that time Mrs. Brown had decided that it was desirable to be independent of Mr. Brown for her "pin-money" at least, and,

either arguing more strongly against her husband's objections this time, or perhaps meeting with less opposition in the matter than on a former occasion, she continued to "see the Kayles through" for a long time to come.

Shirley's pupils had been taken over for the present term by a friend who had studied with her under the same master. The necessity of giving herself the prolonged holiday which Doctor Deering had said she must take had forced itself upon her after a few pathetic experiments. It was extraordinary how completely her former restless energy and capacity for work had disappeared, but in her heart she knew that for a long time it was only her will which had supplied the place of strength, and now that no longer served her.

Old Doctor Deering often stopped his car in passing Bushy Lodge, when he saw Shirley in her hammock under the pepper trees on the side lawn, and came across the grass for a few minutes' chat with her. He had taken a great fancy to his bright-faced young patient. He found her such a refreshing, intelligent, unaffected little person—she was never insipid, her enthusiasms were so genuine and generous, for she was so much the reverse of self-centred that it was natural to her to be immediately interested in whatever interested her friends.

So he found particular pleasure in talking to her about his boy at the Front.

Everybody of Doctor Deering's acquaintance learned, sooner or later, that the chief pride and interest of this old man's life was his soldier son. He told Shirley, with kindling eyes, how Adam had stuck to his post at Gallipoli, when sickening for fever, had taken command of an attack and led it through to victory, when all the officers around him had been killed or wounded, and had fought until he dropped, wounded in three places.

As Shirley listened to the story, she recalled, with her usual mixed feelings of horror and amusement, the day she had sat on the floor of the waiting-room, crying bitterly, and designating this splendid hero a "great big lout," in his own hearing and presence. She wondered what Adam's fierce-looking, fond old father would think of her if he knew. She had a laughing impulse, sometimes, to tell him about it, and reveal herself honourably in her true colours. He would probably be rather displeased if he knew that she, a pert chit of a stay-at-home girl, had called his valiant son a *lout*!

But he would have been more displeased still, of course, to hear of her reason for so naming him. Adam certainly ought to have wiped his boots that day! He had not told of himself, and she would not tell of him, either!

One morning, the doctor strode across the grass towards her with a thick pocket-book under his arm.

"See this?" he asked, after his preliminary greeting. "I haven't lent it to anyone else, but I'm going to lend it to you. It's my boy's diary, written at Gallipoli. I thought you'd like to read it—in fact, I know you would, for there's good stuff in it, which *you'll* be able to appreciate."

Shirley blushed with pleasure as the old man handed her the book.

"I shall love to read it," she said, "if you think your son wouldn't mind. I have only a very silly book from the library to-day, and I'm just in the mood for something really good."

"Well, you'll like this," Adam's father assured her. "It's just a plain record of his days over there, in the form of spare minutes' talks to *me*. Of course, he had no notion of writing for effect, but in my opinion it's as good as any of the published books about life at Gallipoli that I've read—and contains more original thought than most of them."

Shirley smiled sympathetically. She thought she knew exactly what it must feel like to have a son away at the War.

"There's his photo I put inside the cover, taken by one of his mates in Egypt, just before they went over to Gallipoli," went on the doctor. "A jolly fine likeness, too—

these snapshots often make the best portraits. Well, you needn't hurry over reading it. I'll be very busy for the next few days, and sha'n't be calling in."

He drank the last of a lemon squash Phyllis had brought him, wrote a prescription for a change in his patient's three-times-a-day medicine, and went away.

And Shirley began upon Adam's diary.

It was not very long—she had read it right through in a couple of hours. But when she reached the end, she turned back; and picked out bits to read again, powerful bits, descriptive of the fighting in which he had taken part since the glorious, tragic landing; passages suddenly and irresistibly humorous; passages written in the light-hearted mood that comes, sometimes, to men in periods of crowded and desperate adventure; passages—always brief, these—written, one could see, at times when his heart had been wrung with the grief of a strong man for loss upon loss of well-loved comrades; luminous passages, that spoke of many old and new ambitions for the betterment of the world, strengthened and begotten in him by war's tragedy, which had deeply saddened him; truly, but neither baffled, nor embittered, nor, for more than short intervals, depressed him; very human passages of savage grumbling over small inconveniences and privations, the greater ones ignored, or dismissed with a

careless word or two, or made the subject of an expansive jest; eloquent passages, in praise of the individual or collective heroism of gallant comrades. And never a boastful passage from start to finish.

Adam's father was also Adam's closest friend. That was why, in this diary letter, he had unfolded, in his most characteristic fashion, many thoughts and ideas which would otherwise have been withheld, so that when Shirley had read the two hundred pages which comprised the pocket-book, she felt that she knew Adam Deering very well indeed. It was, in fact, two hundred pages' unconscious revelation of a very strong, lovable, and arresting personality. Not six months' personal acquaintance could have given her such intimate knowledge of him as this, for Adam was by nature reserved.

Often, as she read, she turned the pages back to look at the photograph, which, as his father had said, was indeed an excellent portrait.

She took in every detail of the lean, strong face, the face of an idealist who dreamed dreams, and then set out, with energy and practical wisdom, to realise them.

Once, after inspecting the photograph closely, she shut the book with a bang, a flush of humiliation upon her face.

"It doesn't really matter," she told herself, "if he did despise me for making such a

clamorous fuss about an old floor, and crying like a baby over it, when there were so many real and dignified tragedies in the world for which to reserve one's tears. It doesn't really matter, of course . . . only," she added to herself, "it *does* hurt to be an inglorious sort of person, when you go measuring yourself beside heroes, just as it hurts the feelings of undersized weaklings to be stood in a line with giants."

Over in Egypt, just about this time, Adam Deering received his sixth quaint letter from Nancy and Chris.

Nancy's epistle gave him the gist of a sermon she had heard at church on the Sunday previous to writing, which had dealt with the crying need of the disorganised world for earnest workers of good now and after the War.

"I sat as one entranced," wrote Nancy, "as the speaker went on from one fiery utterance to another, and pointed out to the rows of sad, weary faces below him, what a great privilage it was to be alive and do good. And as I listened, I grew deaf to the aching of my own heart, and thought how much rather I would live than die, however miserable I was."

And more to the same purpose, which caused Adam to wonder, a little disturbedly, in the midst of his amusement, whether, in spite of David Chester's assurance to the

contrary, the child was in some way ill-treated at home, that she so constantly spoke of the attractiveness of death, and her brave preference for living, in spite of all.

It was really some minutes after opening the envelope containing the children's letters before Adam read them, for it had also contained a thing which Adam had only dreamed of ever possessing, in such extravagantly happy dreams as we all indulge in, at times, not necessarily with any hope of them ever being realised.

It was the photograph of a girl, sitting between two children on a lawn. He saw her face often in his dreams, and often in his waking hours it would come suddenly before his mental vision.

She sat on the grass in almost the same attitude as when she had sat, a childish heap of despair, on the floor he had spoiled with his footmarks, only then her head had been bowed upon her hands, and here it was tilted upwards, at exactly the angle he remembered when she had suddenly become aware of his presence in the room on that dreadful occasion. He had often thought of it since, with deep regret, tinged with amusement at the recollection of his own horrified discomfiture, and feeble attempts, upon hands and knees, to remedy the damage he had caused.

“Great lout, so you are!” he had said to himself disgustedly, all the way home that day, and many times since, and supplied heated additions to the term which Shirley would have been shocked to hear and eager to refute.

But it was extraordinary good luck, this (whatever quality his luck, in regard to her, had been hitherto), to have her photograph sent to him by those blessed children, his to carry around with him in his breast-pocket, and look at several times in one day.

He gazed at it long and wistfully ere he put it away in his pocket-book for the first time.

“Great big lout!” she seemed to be saying to him, with exquisite laughter. “You looked so ridiculous, kneeling on the floor that day.”

“Anyhow,” he thought uneasily, “she’ll have forgotten what I’m like by now, I expect. She’s only seen me for a minute, twice in her life, to her knowledge, I suppose. If she were put to the test, she might not be able to pick me out from a hundred chaps in khaki.”

But somehow that was cold comfort to Adam. It is to be questioned how he would have felt, could he have seen Shirley Kayle, at that particular moment, lying in a hammock absorbedly reading his diary of Gallipoli, and turning the pages back now

and then to look at the likeness of a face which, he told himself soothingly, must have grown hazy now in her remembrance.

* * * * *

Within a month of making Shirley's acquaintance, Nancy and Chris had transferred to their new music-teacher all the admiration they had once had for Ida Kenning, and more genuine affection, besides, than Ida had ever inspired in them. Shirley's was such a charmingly sweet and sincere personality that her lovers, among children, were almost as numerous as her acquaintances. The natural result of the little Russells' enthusiasm over her was that she began to figure, more and more, in their letters to Adam Deering.

"I suppose he will sneer bitterly when we speak of any girl being sweet, and good, and beautiful," Nancy said to Chris. "Still, I believe, if he could only get to know Miss Kayle, that his faith in women would soon be restored again, so we'll keep on talking of her, and how sweet and lovely she is, as we do of Mrs. Chester, just as if we don't know about him being a woman-hater."

Up to the present they had had three letters from Adam, short letters full of appreciation for their kindness to the lonely old soldier that he declared himself to be, three letters that were undeniably funny in places. Chris laughed at his jokes, but

Nancy said she couldn't for thinking of the aching heart of the writer.

"It was easy to see," she said, "that Adam's gaiety was forced."

When Shirley became ill, she became even more interesting and romantic than before in the eyes of Nancy and Chris. In common with her other pupils, they often went to Bushy Lodge to see her.

Chris filled one of her letters to Adam at this time with quotations from the sayings of Shirley Kayle, whose idle nonsense on the occasion of the children's most recent visit to her had supplied, for once at least, the food for laughter with which Chris deemed it so necessary that he should be regaled.

Nancy's letter was written in a different strain. It told Adam the touching story of Shirley's breakdown.

"The doctor, who strangely enough is none other than your own father, says she has overworked so much that she has worn herself out. We knew before she got ill that she used to wash floors sometimes, although she is such a wonderful musician. One day she had polished a floor all over, and some man came and walked about all over it with tar on his boots, so she cried, and he heard her calling him names when she thought he had gone. And she was very miserable about him seeing her crying, and

about calling him names and hurting his feelings, because she said it was only an accident and the man did not mean to have tar on his boots, she was sure. I think it served him right that he heard her call him names, don't you? "

When Adam received these letters he was in the trenches in France. If Chris had been there to see, she would have felt that it was a much harder task than she had imagined to make Adam Deering laugh, for, though he read her letter and Nancy's several times before putting them away in his pocket, his expression, from beginning to end of each, was one of extreme unhappiness.

CHAPTER XX

MYSTERIOUS GIFTS.

It was about three weeks after that night when Rene and Phyllis had come home from the theatre to find Shirley delirious, that the latter began to show signs of insubordination to the law which condemned her to do nothing but rest for some weeks to come. Until then she had been a model patient, had eaten docilely the food they brought her, had reposed in her hammock, or sat in an easy-chair, and submitted to be waited on from morning till night.

But at last defection set in. One morning, she stole a march on Phyllis, and made her own and the boys' beds, and then, flushed by the triumph of her achievement, went into the kitchen and prepared her own egg flip.

She kept within the law for the rest of that day, but the next morning Rene discovered her furtively dusting the waiting-room. Of course the latter scolded hard, confiscated the duster, and chased the offender out to the verandah. Then she closed the door, and flung a magazine through the window.

"There's a picture-book for you to look

at," she said sternly, "and don't dare to stir until you are called to lunch. It's a terrible thing that you can't be trusted, that as soon as our backs are turned you must be in mischief of some sort. I'm ashamed of you. G-r-r-r——"

Shirley, from her seat on the verandah, protested indignantly.

"There's no need to carry this nonsense too far," she said. "It wouldn't hurt me, now, to do little things, when you and Phyl are kept going so hard, especially while you are busy over those illustrations. Dusting a room couldn't make anyone tired."

But Rene ignored her remarks, and broke into inattentive singing, as she completed the dusting of the room.

The very next morning Phyllis entered the kitchen to find her invalid there, washing up the breakfast things.

"As if it could possibly hurt me, you tyrannical lunatic!" wailed Shirley, when Phyllis laid forcible hands upon mop and tea towel. "I'm not attempting to do any real work, only light things that take up your time and delay you. It's dreadful to be completely idle and useless from morning till night."

"Will you kindly get out of my kitchen?" Phyllis requested, and waved her hand towards the door. "Your intrusion is in the worst possible taste," she continued. "Now

will you go quietly, or do you choose to be forcibly ejected? I shall count three. One—two——”

Shirley retired, defeated, to her hammock.

“I foresaw that you would have trouble of this kind with her, as soon as she began to get stronger,” said Vieve to the sisters, who had been confiding to her the tale of Shirley’s sins of commission. “She will fret to be allowed to work as long as she is here, and sees you with plenty to do. But listen, the air up our line is very good indeed, and it is quite a change from the sea air over here. Let me have Shirley for a month or two.”

“It’s very kind of you to suggest it,” began Rene, but Vieve interrupted her.

“It’s not in the least kind. Shirley will be doing me a great favour if she will come, for I don’t get used to my loneliness, though I do cling to my lonely home. I’ve always liked to feel that I’m expecting David back so soon that it isn’t worth while giving it up, and I’m always hoping, too, that at least the submarine menace will end, so that Mother can get back from England to live with me. I’ve had friends staying with me at intervals ever since David went away, only my being at Fall’s has made it rather awkward for me to invite people lately. But perhaps Shirley would not mind having the afternoons to herself to rest in.”

The matter was put to Shirley, and it was

decided that she was to leave her home to its own devices, and go to the brown bungalow upon the following day.

She reached it in time for lunch.

There was a comically puzzled expression upon Vieve's face, as she served the whiting that formed the first course.

"I don't know whom we have to thank for our lunch," she said. "Half a dozen of these dear little fish were left in a parcel on the kitchen doorstep this morning."

"Very mysterious," commented Shirley.

"Yes, but it's not the first mysterious present we've received lately," rejoined Vieve.

"For the last few weeks our back-door step has been promoted to a kind of altar upon which all sorts of pleasant offerings have been laid—blackberries, wild flowers, fern roots, fresh lettuces, and young green peas."

"How lovely!" exclaimed Shirley, deeply interested. "And you have no idea who does it?"

Vieve laughed.

"Mattie had an idea at the beginning," she replied. "She thought it was one of her sweethearts who was choosing this means of pleasing her instead of doing what she most of all wanted him to do—enlist. But a week later, the young man came out to see her in all the pride of new khaki, and denied any knowledge of the affair. Poor Mattie—she was so relieved and proud, and rather upset,

too. They became definitely engaged that evening. But our mysterious friend has gone on performing kind offices for us ever since. I must show you the clump of pansies I found set in the garden. And one day the soil was dug up round every one of the fruit trees. Yesterday the broken latch on the door of the bush-house was mended."

"But you have some suspicions?" asked Shirley.

"We have made all sorts of conjectures, but none that are satisfactory," replied Vieve.

"What about your queer neighbour, who goes into the bush to swear and play the bugle?" asked Shirley.

"We've thought of him," answered Vieve. "But he doesn't appear to be the least bit interested in us. It isn't likely that he would be, and there is certainly no reason why *he* should want to treat us so handsomely as our unknown friend does. I suppose we shall catch him red-handed some day, but I go to bed too late to get up very early, and on the mornings Mattie has risen extra early she hasn't had any luck."

"Perhaps I shall solve the mystery," said Shirley.

"Now, Shirley, you are not to stay awake, listening for stray sounds," said Vieve, "or I shall be sorry I told you anything about it."

Shirley gave her solemn promise that she would do nothing so foolish.

It was three days before the bungalow was again favoured by a visit from its benefactor, when Vieve made delighted discovery of a new little wooden stand in the bush-house, and a dozen or two of the pot plants which had been rather crowded upon the existing shelves arranged along its three tiers.

But Shirley, though she had been awake that morning from five o'clock until Mattie brought in her breakfast at eight, had heard no sound to arouse her suspicions, though the bush-house was only a few hundred yards from her window.

"You see how silently he goes about his work," said Vieve. "It's really quite distressing."

But the very next morning, luck favoured Shirley in the attainment of her desire.

She was awakened at six o'clock by the sharp yelp of a dog on the other side of the fence, as though someone had unwittingly trodden on his tail.

For a minute or two she lay in drowsy peace, giving no thought to the matter.

Then, suddenly, she remembered the mysterious friend of the bungalow, and, unconsciously straining her ears, fancied she heard the gentle unbolting of a gate.

She got out of bed, and went to the window, which commanded a side view of Yarrowar; by leaning far out she was able to see that the next-door dog, which so

strongly objected to his master's bugling efforts, was down by the back gate, eyeing it expectantly, his head on one side.

"But if I do see the boy come in presently that won't prove anything," said Shirley to herself, and made a rush for her kimono. Then, very softly, she opened her door, and stole across the hall to the breakfast-room, the window of which overlooked the back entrance, and the path towards it.

She opened a single lath of the venetian blind, and peeped out. No one was visible, but she thought she heard a low footfall on the verandah, and remained motionless at her post.

She waited for three minutes without result.

"I'll just see if anyone has been here," she decided, then. "If he has left by the side gate I couldn't have seen him go."

She tiptoed out of the room, and along the passage that led to the kitchen. Here she had the misfortune to bump into a chair, and the jarring sound on the floor must have penetrated to the verandah outside. When she opened the door the next moment, she was just in time to see the boy from Yarrowar bounding, barefooted, down the path to the gate. He was through it in a twinkling. He had only half finished tying a splendid stag-horn fern to one of the verandah posts, from which he had left it insecurely hanging.

The floor underneath it was littered with various lengths of the stout twine which he had been using in the work she had interrupted.

Shirley returned, in a highly gratified state of mind, to her room, and awaited with impatience the time to tell her story.

Vieve was astonished to the point of incredulity when she heard it. The boy's outward bearing towards his neighbours was so entirely uninterested—how could she possibly guess that from the day he had first seen her, he had thought she must be the most beautiful lady in the world; that the music which drifted through her open windows was one of the delights of his life; that upon the day he had learned of her husband being a soldier, away at the Front, he had appointed himself, quite simply and naturally, a guardian and protector over her, in a distant sort of way, during the absence of the particular man in khaki whose dangerous work for the Empire cost her so many anxious hours?

He had performed many acts of service for her of which she knew nothing. He had climbed into her garden in the safe solitude of early mornings to kill the caterpillars on her grape vine; he had prowled by night among her young garden plants, and captured whole armies of marauding snails, before he had been visited by the

inspiration which led him to lay gifts upon her doorstep.

Viève posted a note to Gilbert that afternoon, thanking him for his many kindnesses, and asking him to come in some morning before he went to school, and give her some advice about her garden.

Also that afternoon, Mattie, having previously ascertained that Gilbert had returned from school, and gone out again with his bugle and dog, that Mr. Mason was reading on the front verandah, and the old manservant was clipping the front hedge, ran cautiously through the back entrance of Yerrowar, and deposited a plate of cakes she had just made on the kitchen window-sill, beside the afternoon milk-can.

The next morning, the plate which had held the cakes was on the back step of the bungalow, filled with late apples from one of the Yerrowar trees. A note placed on top of the fruit said :

“ DEAR MADAM,

“ On behalf of Father and self, thank you very much for the cakes.

“ Yours, etc.,

“ GILBERT MASON.”

Madam's invitation to the bungalow was completely ignored by the recipient !

“ It's very hard indeed to get any

‘forrader’ with him,” said Vieve. “If I meet him in the street I’ll certainly stop him. I do want to speak to him, and thank him personally for all the favours he has heaped upon us. Why he has done it I cannot imagine. We can’t be very interesting, you know, Shirley, to a school-boy.”

But Gilbert proved himself exceedingly dexterous in avoiding a meeting with either Mattie or her mistress, and when Shirley’s visit came to an end, a month later, it had still to be effected.

It had been a happy time for Shirley—a procession of luxuriously restful days, and long, peaceful nights of sleep, for Vieve insisted upon her going to bed every evening at nine o’clock.

At eight in the morning Mattie would come to her room with a dainty, flower-decked breakfast tray.

She dressed at her leisure, and spent the rest of the morning with Vieve, in a multitude of pleasant ways. After lunch, when her hostess had gone to Fall’s, she would sit reading, or sewing, or knitting, and dreaming as she worked, in one of the pretty rooms of this altogether beautiful and orderly little home, which was a perpetual and soothing joy to her senses. It was such a different place from poor old hard-worn Bushy Lodge, with its several busy inmates, including two little boys who had a genius for spreading

dust and creating disorder all over the house.

Shirley often spent an hour or more at Vieve's piano, too. It was a beautiful instrument, with a rich sweet tone that made it a delight to Shirley only to finger the notes in soft arpeggios or gentle chords.

Her cheeks were rounder now, and had a pretty tinge of colour in them, that came and went in charming fashion as she talked—she never had recourse now to that little jar of paint which she had bought early last summer. To her great satisfaction she no longer looked "pathetic."

She had never had so much time in which to rest and dream since her childhood. And looking back over it all one day, she was a little disturbed, and a little amused, too, when she realised how much, in her quiet hours, her thoughts had been dwelling upon a certain soldier whose diary of days at Gallipoli she had lately read, and gained thereby an intimate knowledge of the character and personality of the writer.

"Why," she said to herself, with humorous indignation, "I've been thinking more about that careless brute, stranger though he is to me, really, than about any of the dear fellows over there whom I know well, and am thoroughly fond of—boys who have been so thoughtful of me, too, and have never put tar upon my floors in all the time I have

known them. Shirley Kayle! What nonsense is this?"

That evening she said to Vieve:

"I'm going back to Fall's next week."

"The doctor ordered three months' rest," Vieve reminded her.

"But he didn't bargain, perhaps, for my being petted and pampered to such an extent as I have been," Shirley rejoined. "I'm perfectly well and strong now. If I loaf any longer I shall begin to degenerate. People do, you know."

"I'm afraid you have been getting bored alone here in the afternoons," said Vieve.

"My dear, I've had a time of silken ease and happiness with you, which will be a sweet and restful memory to me always," Shirley assured her earnestly. "But oh, I'm longing—really longing—for my pupils again, even the most aggravating of them! I'm longing for my dear, chattering inattentive audiences at Fall's; I'm pining to have to rush for a tram, and catch it by one breathless second; I'm hungry to be busy again, from morning till night!"

She rose from her chair, and stood for a moment facing Vieve—a dominating little figure, her eyes alight with the fire of impulse, fire of ambition, fire of vitality, which Vieve had talked about in a letter to David months ago—fires that were burning more brightly and clearly now than ever.

Vieve, looking at her, knew that she had come into her own again and must have her way.

Shirley smiled her sudden, radiant smile; and, seating herself at the piano, filled the room with the music of a rush of splendid chords.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DARK ROAD

SHIRLEY went back to Fall's the following week, and a week later she took over her music pupils from her locum tenens. It was late in May now, the weather was bracingly cold, and Shirley was so well, and bubbling over with energy, that her musical work was no longer more than she could cope with. Besides, the difference at Bushy Lodge made *all* the difference to her. She never came home now to a dusty, neglected house, and an ill-set dinner-table. It was no longer Shirley who made preparations for washing-day, or wrote out grocery orders.

She came back from her month's holiday at Genevieve's to find Phyllis definitely in command at Bushy Lodge. Rene had surrendered the reins of authority to her junior with amused relief when she found how determined Phyllis was to hold them. She ruefully admitted the truth of the charge Phyllis proved against her of being a hopeless muddler.

"But of course I must do what I can to help you," she said. "I'm not going to leave

everything to you as I did to Shirley." And Phyllis, by this time, was willing enough to be helped, and to issue orders which her good-natured, careless elder made heroic efforts to obey.

The fanatical resolve to wear herself to shreds in the service of her family had become tempered to a determination to do her full share of work thoroughly, and to see that her underlings did the same. Bobby's enthusiasm for cleaning knives and brass plates had evaporated while Shirley was at Lindfield, and Peter, likewise, did not rush to the performance of his allotted tasks with the same zeal that he had manifested in the first weeks following upon Shirley's illness. But Phyllis saw to it that the boys' work was done in the proper time and manner. The smooth working of her methods, proving her ability for management, was something in the nature of a revelation to Phyllis herself, as well as to her family.

She listened to their half-rueful praise of her with a smile in her enigmatic eyes.

"But if I only, only knew what greater thing I was born to be and do!" she cried in her heart.

She watched over her father assiduously, far more than the others knew. She did everything in her power, now, to make the daily scene of his uncongenial work more attractive to him.

The days were drawing towards winter shortness. It was dark now when Vieve reached Lindfield, on her way home from Fall's, and she always walked briskly along the quiet roads that led to the brown bungalow. She was guilty of a secret feeling of nervousness when out alone in the dark, a feeling unpardonable in a soldier's wife, she told herself. But she only indulged it to the extent of making ten minutes' walk of what ordinarily took fifteen, and that was really beneficial on a chill autumn evening. David had been wont to accomplish the whole distance in five minutes in days gone by, when he had lingered too long in the garden before setting off to catch his morning train!

One evening she was later than usual, for she had been delayed in town over some shopping after leaving Fall's, and it was seven o'clock when she reached Lindfield.

It was a wet, misty night, and the lights overhead did little to disperse the darkness.

"I wish there were a cab here," she thought. "It's very dark, and I'm sure to walk into a dozen puddles. The street lamps are not nearly frequent enough."

She had gone a good part of the way, and had come to a large, uncleared allotment of ground which she had to pass, when she heard footsteps at some distance behind her, and looked back to try and ascertain whether anyone she knew were approaching

In the light from one of the houses he had just reached, she faintly discerned a masculine figure, somewhat under the average height, coming towards her.

"I'll walk slowly till he catches up to me," she decided, "and if it's anyone I know, we can go on together. If it isn't, I'll let him get past. I'll feel more comfortable with someone in front of me than behind."

She slackened her pace, therefore, but became nervously aware, the next moment, that the steps of the person behind her had slackened too.

"It's imagination, of course," she muttered, and began to walk quickly.

The speed of the person following immediately increased likewise.

Her heart gave a bound. She tightened her hold upon her hand-bag, and, as she hastened on, agitatedly drew a diamond ring from her finger, rolled it up in her handkerchief, and slipped it down the neck of her dress. Next she pulled out a hatpin, and held it tremblingly in readiness to strike at her assailant in the moment of attack. She wondered what David was doing at that particular moment, and whether, on the other side of the world, he would have any subtle intuition that she was in danger, supposing she were knocked down, robbed, and left unconscious, here upon a lonely road in Australia.

Then her fears, having run to extremity, began to grow less.

"Of course I'm a goose," she thought, "and no one is following me at all. It's just some poor innocent little man, on his way home like me, without a thought of all the evil I'm harbouring in my wicked mind about him. If his pace altered, it was accidental, I daresay."

But her heart beat fast as she passed the darkest portions of the way, lined only by gum-trees and paling fences, and she did not replace her hat-pin.

However, her suspicions had quite vanished when she entered the gate of the bungalow, and saw Mattie standing in the brightly lighted hall, awaiting her.

Of course nobody had been following her with sinister purpose, she assured herself relievedly. The fact that she had reached home unmolested proved that. She told Mattie all about it in a self-derisive voice, as she ate her dinner, by a crackling wood fire.

"There's no wisdom in women being over-courageous," replied Mattie. "I'll come to meet your train to-morrow evening."

"And fly straight in the face of your own motto!" laughed Vieve. "No, Mattie, I wouldn't hear of that. Besides, I want you in the house whenever I am out of it. But I wish it suited Miss Gower to come home by

the same train every evening. I'd make a point of catching it, for the sake of having her company along the loneliest part of the road."

Luck favoured Vieve on the following evening, when she and Miss Gower came from the station together. But the next night she was alone, and again it was raining, and very dark.

She turned her head sharply; she had heard footsteps behind her, although, a moment before, she was certain she had had the road to herself. Sure enough, there was a stealthy figure coming along about a hundred yards behind, walking in the shadow of the fences—a figure very similar in height, she told herself, to that of the person who had walked behind her the night before last.

She knew then that her fears had not been groundless, and that she had been stealthily followed before as she was being followed now. The next moment all reason and all courage forsook her before the compelling dread of that secret, shadowy figure, persistently dogging her footsteps in the darkness, and she began to run. She ran faster than ever she had run in her life before. She sped like the wind, hardly conscious of her feet touching the ground. And, as she flew, she heard from the distance the dreadful footsteps, also running, in pursuit. There

was a hail, too, and a voice bidding her stop, which, if that were possible, only increased the speed of her panic-stricken flight uphill.

Mattie was at the gate, waiting for her, and came hurrying towards her, as her fugitive mistress turned the corner of the street. Vieve had no breath for words of explanation. She only gripped Mattie's arm with a sob of terror and relief, and hand in hand the two ran on to the bungalow.

Vieve almost fell into the hall, and sank, gasping, on to the settle, while Mattie slammed the door and locked it, even drew the bolt for additional safety's sake. Then she turned her attention to her white-faced mistress, trying to soothe her, and asking for an explanation, all in the same breath, and rushing off to bring a drink of water before receiving the answer she had demanded.

"He chased me," panted Vieve at last. "Chased me, and shouted at me."

"Come along and get your things off," said Mattie. "You've escaped the ruffian, anyhow, and he's lost his chance of harming you now, for we'll let the police know to-night. Females are not to be terrified like this while there's law in the land to protect them."

As she finished speaking, footsteps sounded on the verandah, and someone tapped on the door.

The two looked at each other in trembling

fright, but the next moment Mattie spoke reassuringly.

"I expect it's Mrs. Clark," she said, "but I'll make certain before I open the door."

"Who is it?" she called boldly, through the keyhole, and a boy's voice answered:

"It's only me—Gilbert Mason."

"Ah," said Mattie relievedly, to her mistress, "perhaps he saw the wretch chasing you, and will be able to describe him to the police."

She withdrew bolt and chain, and opened the door to Gilbert, who stood outside, very straight and rigid-looking, and with an expression of deep concern upon his face.

"Will you please tell Mrs. Chester," he said, "that I'm sorry if I scared her, on the way from the station. I thought she knew it was me coming along behind her. She needn't ever be scared. I'm always at the train to meet her. I—I've been seeing her home every evening for weeks."

"Well!" exclaimed Mattie. "Well, I never did! Upon my word, now!"

"When she began to run, I saw she was scared," said Gilbert. "I raced after her, to let her know who I was. I sang out, too, and told her, but she didn't seem to hear me."

"Well, I never!" said Mattie again.

"You tell her I won't let anybody hurt

her ever—as long as her husband's away," said the boy.

But Vieve was at the door now, smiling, but touched almost to the point of tears.

"How very good you have been to me!" she exclaimed. "It was silly of me to get frightened, I know. But why—*why* didn't you come and speak to me at the station?"

He raised his contrite eyes to hers, for one second of desperate courage.

"I'm very sorry I gave you such a scare!" was all he said in reply, and his voice was bitter with his sense of failure.

Then he lifted his hat, and went swiftly away.

CHAPTER XXII

FOREBODING

As Genevieve looked out into the wet darkness from her window-seat in the train, the following evening, a comfortable feeling of security possessed her.

She was thinking that, somewhere near Lindfield station, her queer young cavalier would be lurking in wait, to guard her from all harm on the road home.

She did not doubt for a moment that he would be there; she was quick to understand how seriously he had assumed the patriotic duty of guarding her, a soldier's wife, whenever he thought she might need his protection. She had had experience, already, of his zeal in her service, and guessed rightly that nothing would shake him in his staunch devotion.

But she had not sought an opportunity of making friends with him for so many weeks without being able to realise, now, that it might prove a harder task than one would suppose to induce this lad to accompany her from the station, instead of following her at a distance like a faithful slave.

However, she had no intention of abandoning, or being defeated in, her attempt.

"I'll fight his obstinacy with unscrupulous weapons," she said to herself. "Whatever *he* may think about it, I simply won't consent to being silently shadowed home like that every evening." She laughed into her furs. "The idea is too ridiculous to be at all supportable," her thoughts continued. "When we've gone a little way along the road, I'll pretend to sprain my ankle, and demand his arm to lean upon, or call out that I'm too frightened to move a step forward without him beside me. And I *won't* move a step till he comes, so there!"

But though Genevieve comprehended, and laughed tenderly over the extent of her cavalier's shyness, and the handicap it was to him, she did not realise his capacity for wrestling with the enemy in extremity.

So, on leaving the station, she gave a start of surprise when Gilbert, his face pale and stern, came forward to meet her, lifted his hat, and said, in a voice of quiet determination:

"Good-evening, Mrs. Chester."

"Oh—good-evening," she exclaimed. She almost stammered the words, so taken aback was she.

But Gilbert went on unflinchingly with his own performance. He had been rehearsing it, word by word, action by action,

through several hours of the previous night, and every hour of the day. He was utterly ashamed of the stupid manner of attendance upon her which had led to her terror-stricken flight of the night before, and he was very well aware of the fact that it had become too ridiculous, now, to be continued any longer.

"Let me carry your music for you," he said, and stretched out his hand to take it.

He had said that and done that a hundred times over in imagination during the day. He had murmured the words nervously, as the train steamed in.

Vieve surrendered her satchel, and they set off together.

"I do appreciate your goodness in coming to meet me, Gilbert," she said earnestly. "For I *am* rather nervous when I'm out alone after dark."

His well-rehearsed response came instantly. "It's a pleasure, I assure you."

Vieve stole a puzzled glance at him. This self-possessed, gentlemanly behaviour was quite disconcerting.

"You have been just showering kindness on me for weeks," she resumed.

"Don't mention it," he said politely, but if he had said them as he felt them, the words would have been spoken as an anguished appeal.

"Did you get my note of thanks?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"Ah, I thought perhaps it had gone astray," she said pleasantly, "because you quite ignored the invitation in it, you know."

For the first time he hesitated before replying. Beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead, but after a brief pause, his reeling brain supplied him with a dignified response.

"I—must apologise for that," said he.

And so they continued, friendly question or observation, and frigid answer, all the way to the bungalow, with now and then an interval of short silence, or of bright conversation on Vieve's part, when, had she been observing him very intently, she might have noticed the queer, shy glance he cast upon her now and then, and the little, one-sided smile that hovered once or twice about his mouth, pleasantly disturbing the set grimness of his face.

It was hard to believe that this stately, taciturn youth was the same whom she had often heard swearing at his dog, or breezily talking and laughing with other boys in the next-door paddock.

The following evening she used all her ingenuity to draw him into natural conversa-

tion, but again he answered her remarks as briefly as possible, and so dismissed every opportunity she offered him of discoursing to her upon matters of interest to himself.

Only, ere he left her at the bungalow gate, he nerved himself to ask a deliberate question.

“How’s your husband getting on?”

She knew him well enough now to feel greatly encouraged by the inquiry, and she told him eagerly her latest news of David—how she had had letters from him written since his arrival in France, and of his delight in the green meadows, the primroses and the violets there, after months of the Egyptian desert, and the frown of harsh Gallipoli.

“I hope you’ll be making each other’s acquaintance before long,” Vieve went on. “I’m sure you’ll be very good friends.”

He gave her a smile of gratification, and bade her good-night.

He came into the bungalow garden openly the next Saturday morning, and dug there for a couple of hours. During the following week, in spare half-hours, he made an additional shelf running round three walls of the bush-house. Vieve guessed that he would be happier if left to himself to hammer and dig, and so she did not trouble him much with her presence; but she understood,

too, that he liked her to come and superintend his work now and then. At these times, in the interest of deciding how best a thing would be done, he forgot his shyness entirely, and revealed to her his natural, shrewd, enthusiastic, and very interesting self.

He began to respond, more and more, and almost unconsciously, to her efforts to "draw him out." He told her some bush anecdotes and school jokes, and was gratified at her interest, and her intelligent appreciation of the best points in his stories.

June passed away, and July reigned. Since they had first seen the primroses and violets of a French spring blooming in French woods, there had been many gallant Australians laid to rest in French graves.

Nancy and Chris still wrote long letters to Adam Deering, full of cheer and veiled comfort, and words of encouragement, also veiled, to live on if possible.

Chris felt that she had done what she could for Adam when her fortnightly letter to him was despatched, and her prayers for him were regularly said, but Nancy was more of a little woman than Chris, a serious little woman, too, and overmuch given to worrying.

And she worried about Adam Deering more than anyone knew. Whenever she

happened to wake during the night she would think about him, and the marching melody of that song about the French soldier would echo through her mind, impressing her afresh with its despairing, reckless ending.

It had comforted her greatly, however, to hear that Adam, while still in Egypt, had been transferred to David's Company, which made it possible for the latter to keep his eye on their hero better now than ever.

One evening, when Gilbert met Vieve at the station, her smile of greeting came slowly, and she was almost as quiet as he himself had been the first time they had walked to the bungalow together.

Gilbert ate his dinner in silence that evening, but Mr. Mason made no comment. A silence, which had in it nothing oppressive, often held this father and son from beginning to end of a meal.

But when it was over, and Mr. Mason was seated in his big chair before the fire, with pipe and evening paper, Gilbert, standing on the hearth-rug, with his back to the mantelpiece, became more communicative.

"I think she's feeling a bit down to-night, Dad," he said, without preface of any kind.

"Is she? Ah, I'm sorry for that, poor

girl," returned Mr. Mason. He was a lean, tall man, with a much-lined face, prematurely aged by pain and care and the weathering of many long summers of toil—a kindly face, with its smile-lines graven as deeply as any of its others.

Gilbert prodded a piece of coal in the grate meditatively with the toe of his boot.

"We haven't anything I could take in to cheer her up, I s'p'ose?" he remarked.

"Eh?" said Mr. Mason. "Well, if there's anything you can think of, old fellow, she's very welcome." He looked around the room, as if for inspiration, but his glance returned to his paper, unenlightened.

"She's all by herself to-night, too," Gilbert said. "I wouldn't mind so much if she had even that blessed servant to talk to, but *she* has her soldier fellow yarning in the kitchen—heard him come in the back gate just after I got home."

"I expect he'll soon be going away, that chap," remarked Mr. Mason, as sympathetically interested in the lowly couple in the bungalow kitchen as in Genevieve and *her* soldier.

But Gilbert was not so impartial. Genevieve was his sole concern, and so he allowed his father's observation to pass without comment.

He began to rove restlessly about the room,

paused beside the bookcase, but told himself she had read everything in it that would interest her, pondered for a little longer, and then made up his mind.

He told his father he would be back soon, and went off to the bungalow.

Vieve herself came to the door in response to his gentle ring. Her face, in the strong light of the hall, looked pale and sad, but it brightened at sight of him.

"I just ran in to see if you wanted anything," he said.

"And I was just wishing," she rejoined, in a relieved, grateful voice, "that you would come in and talk to me. Could you really spare time, for a while?"

"O' course," he answered, with laconic heartiness, and followed her to the cosy smoke-room where she had been sitting.

He had never been in it before, yet his glance went straight towards the big, brown, watching portrait of David, which hung beside Vieve's davenport. It seemed the most dominant thing in the room. It was like a personal presence.

He gave her a swift smile, and crossed the room to inspect it more closely, turned from it to the David on the left, and then to the David in civilian tweeds on the davenport shelf.

He made a grave, leisurely survey of the

three, and then Vieve showed him other portraits of her soldier.

"He looks a nice chap," said Gilbert at last, which was not very much to say, certainly, and yet seemed just the right remark for Gilbert to make, expressive of complete approval, and his satisfaction, judging by appearances, to continue in the service of such an officer.

Vieve seated herself in one of the easy-chairs, and motioned Gilbert to another.

"Do you know, Gilbert, the old War has got me down to-night," she said.

He did know. That was why he was here, but he only said, "Has it?"

"Yes, and when it does that, I think it's a beautiful luxury to be able to whine and grizzle a bit."

She smiled at him wistfully. No one realised more than she that, this being everybody's War, it was incumbent upon everybody to be, externally at least, cheerful about it. But—here was her staunch young guardian, pledged, it seemed, to serve and indulge her at her need.

"If only there's someone to listen who won't get too indignant, or lose patience, or take too much notice of what I say," she finished.

He smiled understandingly—his one-sided, but no longer embarrassed smile.

"Go ahead," he said slowly, after a moment's deliberation.

She did go ahead. She told him, unstoically, unheroically, how tired she was of the War, how tired she felt of trying to be brave when she wasn't brave at all, told him, unreasonably, how much worse it was for her than for anybody else. "Because there's no one in the world like David," she said. "It is cruel and sad for anyone to have to go away and take such risks, but for David——"

She paused, but there was no glimmer of a smile, or hint of a desire for argument, upon his face.

"Besides," she said, "I'm sure there are very few who feel it so badly as I do. Lots of people who have relations at the Front are as cheerful and happy as anything. I only *pretend* to be bright, and interested in other things, but——"

She paused again, and looked at him hard.

Suddenly his mouth relaxed into a grin—a grin not devoid of sympathy, but a grin nevertheless.

And Genevieve laughed outright, and Gilbert then did likewise.

"Having said all that, I feel better," she said. "And you *can* laugh at yourself when you *say* things like that, if you only have

someone you dare say them to; but if you just *think* them, they won't really seem so terribly mean, and cowardly, and ridiculous, and you'll go on thinking them, without getting a bit more ashamed, or a bit more cheerful for it."

"Best way's to get it off your chest," agreed Gilbert. "But cowardly and all that be—be—*blowed*!"

"It's very kind of you to say so," smiled Vieve, "but it's everything I said it was to harbour such thoughts as I sometimes do. Now that I've uttered them, though, I've stopped drowning my soul in self-pity, and begun to cheer up. I don't know what I should have done without you this evening, Gilbert—I was feeling so desperately miserable when you came in."

After which they fell to discussing the War in general, and Gilbert furnished her with many optimistic reasons for believing that peace was near at hand.

When he left her, she went to her davenport, and began a letter to David.

She wrote a single line, paused, and looked slowly around the quiet room. All the brightness had gone from her face when she came back to her letter.

"I'm not cheered up at all," she confessed to herself. "I've been frightened and

miserable all day. I'm absolutely sick with fear at this minute."

She turned her scared face towards the portrait of the watching David above her.

It was such a vividly, luminously expressive portrait, that it seemed to Genvieve to hold the index of many moods of David, variously uppermost in the picture at various times, according, perhaps, to the mood of his wife.

And, as she gazed at it now, it seemed to her that David looked back at her with such tiredness, such sadness, in his eyes—an unwonted expression for David's eyes to hold.

She took up her pen. Her heart was like lead. She began her letter again, on the same sheet, as though she had forgotten, and did not see, that it was already started.

"David, dearest," she wrote, and looked up at the picture once more, and murmured the words she had written, in a kind of piteous appeal.

And then, slowly, it seemed to her that the watching eyes warmed and brightened, and David's smile came back to them.

She gazed long and wistfully, glanced away, and then looked anxiously up again.

But the smile remained in the watching eyes, and, a little comforted, she returned to her letter.

And yet, at that moment, David was lying, still and heedless, with closed eyes turned towards the sky, in a gaping shell-hole out in No Man's Land, somewhere in stricken France.

CHAPTER XXIII

LOST PROPERTY

It had been an unlucky raid, which had not taken those men in the opposite trenches by surprise. More than half-way across No Man's Land, enemy machine-guns had opened fire upon the shadowy, hurrying soldiers there. Less than half their number had reached the enemy trenches. They had wrought some havoc there, it is true, but the price had been heavy.

There had been a fierce reciprocal bombardment since then, which had lasted until the dawn. And now the long summer day that had followed was almost over.

And David still lay where he had fallen, foremost in the raid of the night before, feebly conscious now, after a long period of oblivion.

There was another man, with a shattered left arm, and a shrapnel wound in his head, clumsily bound with a handkerchief, lying on the open field, a hundred yards away from the crater where David was. This man was feverishly alert; his bloodshot

eyes stared with weary eagerness about him. He had waited so long for the darkness, it had seemed to him that the light would never go.

He too had been unconscious for a time, after he had fallen. And there had been for him, since then, several periods of oblivion, alternating with times in which he had made painful and helpless rediscovery of himself.

But the last period of oblivion before the dawn of that day had been sleep, an exhausted sleep, after two nerve-racking days and nights without it. And he had awakened with the instinct for self-help awake in him also.

In one of his pockets there were some malted milk tablets—they had been taken out of the glass bottle which had originally contained them, and packed for safe carriage in a flat tobacco-tin, carefully re-labelled in childish handwriting, and the directions from the bottle faithfully copied for his guidance :

“One or more tablets, slowly dissolved on the tongue, whenever hungry, faint or exhausted.”

He had remembered the flat tin and its contents in his need, had smiled very slightly, and eaten three tablets before making an effort to get his arm into a more comfortable position, and fasten that rough bandage,

held in place by his hat, about the wound in his head.

His brain was clear then. He stated to himself lucidly the facts of last night's adventure, up till the time when he had been hit; he reckoned, laboriously, how long he had been lying there, did the mental sum of hours three times over to make sure of its correctness.

Curiosity stirred and grew urgent in him. He wanted to know how the rest of the boys had fared, exactly where he was, everything that had happened since he had dropped out of the grim game. He seemed so vastly alone in a desolate land, with no sounds about him save the whine and whisper of the shells, and a murmur of wind above him.

He wondered whether the stretcher-bearers would find him, and whether he would be able by his own efforts to get back to his own lines.

He knew he would probably have to wait for the darkness in either case, that he must, in all likelihood, spend a day—a hideously long day—out here in torment, before any relief could come, before he could attempt to help himself towards safety.

With the realisation of his prospects came a keen longing for company. The loneliness was oppressive and terrible—worse to bear than the physical pain. He suffered it,

and thought about it, for a long half-hour before an inspiration for comfort, and something like companionship, came to him. He took out his pocket-book.

It would have been easy to tell by his expression, a moment later, that the thing he sought in it was missing. He knitted his brows, as he began a search through the pockets of his tunic, remembering.

He remembered that he had taken the photograph (it was a snapshot of a girl sitting on a lawn, with a child on either side of her) out of the book yesterday, for a refreshing glimpse, that he had received a hasty summons, and had thrust it quickly into—which pocket was it?—intending to return it to the book later on. And now it was in no pocket at all—it was lost! His mouth grew grim as the realisation smote him. It was not a light loss. It made the sense of his loneliness out here, and the prospect of his day's waiting, grow heavy and terrible again.

About ten yards away from him, a square of white on the ground caught his eye. He wondered if it were his missing photograph, lying there face downward.

It might be so, indeed, but he could not go forward to see. Ten yards was a mile by daylight on No Man's Land. But it was a teasing thought, nevertheless. He turned his head, and looked at the mocking

square, and told himself, bitterly, what a little distance was ten yards in ordinary times and circumstances.

Of course there was only one chance in a thousand that the white thing on the ground was his picture. He turned his head resolutely away. It was no time for the indulgence of sentimental weaknesses out here, wounded and alone, with death whining hungrily about him.

It would not be there when night came, perhaps; it might have blown away; he would not be able to see it. He hated to think of leaving it there, if it *were* his photograph, to be deliberately depriving himself of it, and leaving that sweet, pictured face to be trampled underfoot, perhaps, or picked up some day, as a battlefield souvenir, by friend or foe.

He ground his teeth, stifled a moan, and looked away.

He was willing to admit that it was a childish, foolish fancy which possessed him, but he had an obstinate conviction—a half-delirious and very bitter conviction—that it was the little picture he valued so greatly out there on the trampled earth.

Just once more he turned to look, and in that moment the fates came to his aid, for they sent a gust of wind towards him, that caught up the white square, and set it down hardly more than an arm's breadth

beyond him. He crept a pace or two nearer to it, stretched out his arm, and took it in his grasp.

The next moment he was laughing helplessly. That he had cast so many hungry glances upon this! An old letter, a letter belonging to some other chap—a bit of scribbled waste-paper.

And then on that disappointing piece of paper, his own name leapt out at him—"Adam Deering."

He stared at it in speculative surprise for a moment or two. Then it occurred to him to read what else was written there, and he glanced back to the beginning.

"Dear Mr. Chester," he read. "We got your lovely letter yesterday written from Egypt in March. It was an unspeakable relief to Chris and me to hear that Adam Deering would be fighting under you in future. Sometimes I fane would hope that his wound has begun to heel under the touch of Time and that the tender simpathy which Chris and I have poured upon his broken heart has not been all in vain, also your doing so much from day to day to weene him from his despirate longing for death. But at other times a cold fear grips me, and I recall again those sad despairing eyes in which all the fires of hope seemed for ever quenched and remember again the black sorrow that fell upon him when he returned

to Sydney and I picture him rushing into the yawning arms of death with a hollow mocking laugh."

There followed some general news, and the love and signature of Nancy Russell.

Adam read the letter with growing amazement.

"The poor little kid is certainly barmy," he reflected. "Chester won't admit it, but I've thought so for some time—the way she's always harping on the nobility of women and the luxury of living—it's not natural for a kid to go on like that. But there's something to be explained, all the same. . . . Some day I must ask—must ask Chester——"

Chester! He opened his eyes wide at the thought of him. A moment before he had felt himself drifting towards incoherence. Now he was painfully himself again.

Where was Chester? This letter had been carried towards him from the direction of the enemy lines. It might be that the man to whom it had been written was further on over there—wounded, dying, dead, or a prisoner.

He closed his eyes, and clenched his teeth. He was trying, with painful earnestness, to piece the memories of a desperate hour more closely together. Chester had been ahead in that wild rush forward under fire. Heavens! Yes! He had seen Chester hit, too, just after his own arm had been torn

with sharp agony—had seen him reel, and then—and then had come that blow on the head, with the gleaming of a million stars, the shouting of a million voices in his ears, and oblivion, deep and deeper.

Unless he had been able to get back, with or without the assistance of some of the fellows, Chester was on ahead, then; wounded, dying, dead, or a prisoner of war. But in all probability he was not very far from the spot where he himself had fallen.

The long day crept on. He was delirious at intervals, with pain and heat and thirst. But a definite purpose held his mind throughout, and when the cool twilight came, his brain was clear, and fixed upon its fulfilment.

Slowly, slowly the dusk gathered, slowly the blessed darkness fell. The moment came when he staggered to his feet, fell dizzily to his knees, rose again, and began walking unsteadily in the same direction as he and his comrades had run, under heavy fire, last night.

It was comparatively quiet to-night. Both sides were "putting over" a few shells at intervals, but that, by comparison with the previous night, was nothing.

Fifteen minutes later, in the crater where he had fallen, Adam found whom he sought—there was enough faint light from moon and stars to guide him to the place, and David

was again conscious enough to answer him when he spoke.

He could not tell to what extent David was wounded. His limbs appeared to be intact, but his breathing was difficult.

There was water in Chester's bottle, and Adam held it to his officer's lips, and swallowed some himself. In the need of the hour it seemed to him that he had double the strength which had been his portion a little while before.

"Somehow or other, *I've* got to tear *you* out of the yawning arms of Herr Death!" he muttered.

"You must help me to get you on my back, old man," he said aloud. "I'm rather awkward myself, being winged—but we'll manage it."

He had to tell this to David several times before his words produced any effect. It was not till half an hour afterwards that he began to stagger back across No Man's Land, with his barely conscious burden clinging feebly about his neck.

Half an hour later still, the stealthily moving figures of two stretcher-bearers came towards them, and once more Adam beheld a million stars, and heard a million voices call, and fell again into the deep valley of oblivion.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE OLD PAIN

THE news sped under the sea—under those thousands of miles of waves rolling between the old Mother Country in the west and the island continent in the south—that Lieutenant David Chester was severely wounded and dangerously ill; that Sergeant Adam Deering was severely wounded too.

A few weeks later sped another, a reassuring message, to a pale and anxious-eyed young wife, that Lieutenant David Chester was out of danger; a message to a gruff and fond old father, strangely aged in those few weeks, that Sergeant Adam Deering's left arm had been amputated, and that he was progressing favourably.

There came private messages, too, from the invalids themselves—"Don't worry—doing famously" messages; and, two months later, from over the sea, over those thousands of miles of waves, there came one line scrawled by David, with pages of comfort and detail from Mrs. Stockley, Vieve's mother, in England, who had seen David and also his friend

and saviour, Adam Deering, in hospital there together. Mrs. Stockley wrote to Doctor Deering, too, and promised to send a letter to him by every mail until his son was well on the road to recovery.

Over in Australia as the cables, and later on, the letters, about David Chester and Adam Deering arrived, there was a girl who awaited the latest news almost as hungrily as Vieve and the old doctor—whose mind dwelt continuously upon well-remembered passages in a worn leather pocket-book, which, a few months before, had given her such an intimate knowledge of the character and personality of the writer.

His praises were ringing daily in her ears, for Genevieve was full of the most fervent gratitude to Adam. The doctors had expressed their opinion that David had been rescued from that shell-crater only in the nick of time, that, had he remained for many hours longer without skilled medical attention, he would in all probability have succumbed to his wounds.

Adam was awarded the D.C.M., and his portrait was published in the newspapers, with the portraits of other decorated men. Shirley cut it out, and secretly indulged in more extravagant hero-worship than Vieve, her friend, or Nancy and Chris, her pupils, were openly avowing for Adam.

And then something happened which, for

the time being, drove Adam Deering from Shirley's thoughts.

One day, when Phyllis ran out to the workshop to summon her father to the surgery, she found him sitting at his bench with his face livid and drawn with agony.

He looked up at her entrance.

"It's nothing," he muttered feebly, "only the old pain worse than usual."

But there was no reassurance for Phyllis in this. She had not known that he suffered habitually from any pain; he had never spoken to them of feeling ill.

A week or two ago it had struck her that he looked more dreary than usual, and she had asked him, anxiously, if he were sure he was not overworking, and he had smiled and answered, "Indeed, no!"

"It might be fancy," she had said dubiously, "but I don't think you look well."

And he had paused a moment—almost, it seemed, in abstraction—before replying:

"Don't have fancies about me, my dear; I'm just the same as usual.—Are things all right in the house? Going smoothly?"

"Quite," she answered.

"That's good, and I have been kept a bit busier in the surgery, lately," he responded in a hopeful tone. "We must see if we can't manage to afford some more help in the house for you, before long."

She thought of this little conversation now,

as she stood in alarm beside him, hearing him tell her that it was only the old pain from which he was suffering.

She ran to the studio for Rene, and together they helped him up to the house.

He said he would rest for an hour or two, and repeated his assurance that he would be better directly.

Phyllis dismissed the patient in the surgery, and then went to the telephone, and called up Doctor Deering's number.

"It is just Shirley's case over again," she said to Rene bitterly. "He has been ill for a long while, perhaps, and we have never noticed—never known."

Doctor Deering came to Bushy Lodge an hour later. He was with Mr. Kayle for a considerable time. When he came out to the dining-room where the two girls so anxiously awaited him, they knew, at sight of his face, that what he had to tell them was serious.

"Yes, your father is very ill," he said slowly. "It is an affair of long standing, yet he tells me he has never consulted a doctor."

"Has he been suffering for years, then?" asked Rene. "If so, he has never spoken of it."

"I think he has suffered so constantly that bearing pain must have become a habit with him," replied the doctor, "a state of mind more than an urgent physical fact. And so I

imagine even he himself cannot have actually realised quite how much he has suffered. But I wonder that he has been able to carry on his work with any regularity or energy."

The two girls looked at each other mutely for a moment.

"Is he in great danger?" asked Phyllis.

"I'm afraid so; his heart is in a very bad state, and there are all sorts of complications."

"Is he going to die soon?" Phyllis still spoke steadily, but the effort to voice such a terrible question drove every vestige of colour from her cheeks.

"My dear, I don't know," he answered gently.

He was silent for a moment or two, looking compassionately from one to the other.

"He may live for months yet," he added, "but"—he paused, and then went on—"you must be prepared for what may happen at any time—at any moment."

A big fly hummed through the room, and out at the window; it was the only sound that broke the silence for several moments after the doctor had finished speaking.

"Does he know?" asked Phyllis, and this time her voice came only in a whisper. Speech seemed to Rene impossible.

"He insisted on being told the truth—he was not in the least disturbed, except for your sakes. You will all need to be very brave—I know you will be, too—and not

distress him by giving way to grief in his presence, and, remember, I have warned you of what *might* happen, because I thought it best that you should know. It is quite likely that nothing will happen, as I said, for months. He should always rest completely for several hours after one of these bad attacks. Don't try to keep him in bed, though, but if you can prevail upon him to take things easily, so much the better."

So long as their lives lasted, the Kayles would remember, and be able to recall at will, the strange, tense, tragic atmosphere of that evening. Their father did not join them; he lay dozing in his room, resting after that sharp attack of "the old pain."

In the face of this new knowledge concerning him, he seemed more apart, more withdrawn from them, than ever. Phyllis, with her greater understanding of him than the others possessed, comprehended, with keener pain than they, that his aloofness from them all (and not only from them, but from everybody) had become, through the years, a matter of second nature with him, so that it would not have occurred to him to tell them of his suffering. She felt that, in spirit, he had been, though the victim of it, a little aloof from it, a little disdainful of it, himself.

They sat up late that night, and when they at last went to bed, it was not to sleep.

At two in the morning, Phyllis went tip-

toeing up the hall to his room, where a light burned dimly. He was asleep, she thought, but, as she was turning away, he opened his eyes, and saw her.

And he smiled at her, the next moment, in an understanding, reassuring way—a smile that she remembered, with much comfort, all her life afterwards. It was as though he comprehended, with subtle intuition, all the tumult of sorrow, and poignant pity, and yearning over him, that was in her heart.

He held out his hand to her.

“It’s all right, my dear,” he said quietly.

So she kissed him, and went back to bed.

But, an hour later, the desire to return to him, and satisfy herself that he wanted nothing, became too urgent to remain ungratified.

“I’m afraid you’ll disturb and worry him,” whispered Shirley.

“No, I shan’t,” returned Phyllis, and once more stole to his room.

He was lying just as she had left him—asleep, she thought. But there seemed something oppressive and solemn in the silence of the room, that was accentuated by the racing “tick-tick-tick-tick” of his watch, on the table beside the bed.

She crept nearer, and, moved by a sudden, compelling impulse, turned up the light to the full.

It flared down upon his face as he lay there,

very peaceful, very still, every line set in an expression of aloofness, and of tranquillity.

It was strange that, standing there, in the first shock of realisation, his words of an hour before sounded again in her ears, like an echo :

“ It’s all right, my dear ! ”

CHAPTER XXV

PHYLLIS TO THE RESCUE

ONE afternoon, a fortnight later, Phyllis unlocked the door of her father's workshop, which no one had entered since the day of his death.

She went in, closed the door after her, and came slowly forward to the bench, which was covered with a litter of instruments, plaster of Paris, and other articles that had appertained to the mechanical part of his work.

She sat down on a stool beside the bench. She was quite dry-eyed. As she looked about the room, taking note, with minute attention, of everything it held, there was not a quiver of that grave, strong young mouth of hers.

Only her face was very pale.

She had come here to think, to try and form a practical plan for realising a certain definite ambition that filled her mind.

The anxious wondering and speculation of old days no longer troubled her, and she felt that the jumble of thoughts and half-formed ideas which had seethed in her mind during

the last fortnight, and with which, until now, she had not attempted to grapple, would assume force and coherence here in this quiet place, with the signs of her father's detested work, from which he had for ever escaped, all about her.

She picked up the plaster cast of a grinning set of teeth from the bench, and she thought :

“He is free and happy now—free to use gifts that we never knew of, that he had buried here, for lack of faith in himself, lack of encouragement and opportunity.”

During the last few months of work and self-discipline, Phyllis had unconsciously been learning something—contradictory to her old ideas—of herself. Now her knowledge came to her aid, with a new ambition, for the realisation of which she was trying to devise some thoroughly practical plan—a simple ambition, just to earn her own living and help the others in such a way that they might all remain here together in this old home where they had all been born, and where her father, too, had spent his life.

Inside the house there was a little gathering of relations, talking business and discussing plans for the future disposal of the family.

“I shall take Peter and Bobby,” said Mrs. Stanley, who was Myra, the eldest of the Kayle sisters; she had come up from Melbourne a week before. There was some secret misgiving in her heart, for the little

boys had ever been a trial to her, and her husband was a man of nerves, who had given his consent to the proposal most reluctantly. But she knew none of the other relations would be willing to undertake the charge of the two, and she announced her decision in a cheerful tone.

"It's a great pity that Mary invested her money as she did," remarked Mrs. Bennett (Cousin Olivia). "You know, girls, if only your mother had taken my advice in money matters, you might have all been very comfortably off now. And I must say it was a shock to me to hear that your poor father had so little. The insurance, and the money from the house, if it is sold or rented, will be something, but not much, among six of you. Dear, oh dear! Of course, it's quite impracticable for you to stay on here, as you must all go out and earn money. Phyllis had better learn typing, I suppose. I'll take Shirley to live with me, but you'll have to hire a room in town for your pupils, Shirley, my dear."

Shirley did not answer. She was the only one of those under discussion present at the time, but she was so painfully preoccupied in the bearing of a great heart-ache, that she only listened vaguely.

"If only Angus were a few years older!" said Mrs. Herbert Kayle, their Aunt Beryl. "The poor boy is hardly earning more than

enough to keep himself in clothes and pocket-money. He had better come to me. Keith and he will quarrel, no doubt, but it would be worse still to bring any other girls amongst mine."

"So there are still Rene and Phyllis to be disposed of," remarked Mrs. Arnold, their Aunt Gertrude, fretfully. "I'm afraid I can't make any offers, as we are so very unsettled now."

Myra flushed. The phrase, "disposed of," and Mrs. Arnold's tone, filled her with resentment.

"I'd love to have them both living with me—I'd love to have the whole six of them," she said recklessly, "if only it were practicable. But Rene and Shirley couldn't give up their work here, and Phyl seems so set against the idea."

"Really, I don't think Phyl's personal whims can be humoured," said Aunt Beryl, and Myra bit her lip and went red and white in turn. The Kayles had always been agreed that they had an abominable set of relations.

Rene had entered, with afternoon tea, in time to hear the last three speeches. Now she seized her opportunity to remark:

"Don't worry about me, anybody, please. Of course I shall rent a little room and batch in some quiet home, and take a big room somewhere for my pupils."

"And of course Phyl and I will batch

with you," said Shirley, rousing herself suddenly. "But oh," she added, in a voice of heart-broken longing, "if only we could go on living here all together as before, even if we had to live on bread and water!"

"I am afraid, Shirley, my dear, that you will have to brace yourself against these weak, sentimental ideas, and try to be practical," remarked Mrs. Bennett. "And this batching notion is utterly absurd."

It was just then that Phyllis entered, drew a chair up to the table, and sat down.

"What has been decided about us?" she asked.

"That you are each to go and live with whatever relations are kindly disposed to offer you a home," answered Cousin Olivia. She had always disliked Phyllis and her casualness.

"Oh, no," said Phyllis decidedly. "We're not going to be a nuisance to our relations. None of them want us, really. I think we shall be able to stay on at Bushy Lodge."

It was the signal for all the relations to lose patience at once. Even Myra said wearily:

"Don't be absurd, Phyl dear. We are not here to waste time, you know."

"But I have a perfectly practical, common-sense plan," said Phyllis. "I haven't said anything about it before, because I've only just finished thinking it out. It's heroic of you to offer to take Peter and Bobby, Myra

dear, but there's no reason why they shouldn't stay on here. You were never able to manage them very well, whereas I am. Of course, you might help now and then with their clothes, and so on, if you liked, and they must go to a public school, and—sleep out, summer and winter, but that will be good for them."

"Phyl, what *are* you talking about?" exclaimed Myra.

"It's a good thing we have so much sheltered verandah space," continued Phyllis, "for I think we shall *all* sleep out. We have always wanted to, but it was one of the things that irritated Father to see beds about on the verandahs, so—so we didn't have them there."

Her voice broke, but the next moment she went on bravely :

"We girls must keep a room to dress in, of course, and the boys must fix up canvas partitions on the side verandahs. And they might grow vegetables for our own use, and keep fowls, too. We've plenty of ground for both. Now, here's my plan : We shall let the surgery, waiting-room, and workshop, to a doctor or a dentist. We are quite close to the tram, don't forget, so it won't be hard to do that, and it will bring in a fair amount of money. There will be three bedrooms to spare, then, and one that I'll turn into a sitting-room for my boarders."

"Boarders! The idea!" exclaimed more than one of the relations at the same moment, and most scornfully they spoke.

"Phyllis, you are far too young and inexperienced to earn money in such a way," said Aunt Beryl in a more kindly tone.

"No, I'm not," returned Phyllis. "I don't mean it to be an ordinary boarding-house, you see, but just a comfortable home, exclusively for the benefit of girl artists and students, who would come to us prepared to live simply, to keep their rooms in order and to observe certain rules that you, in your wisdom and experience, might help us to draw up. Of course, we'll have only girls we know personally, or who are well recommended to us."

"I know some darling art students, country girls, batching in Sydney, who would simply love to come to us!" exclaimed Rene. "I think it's a splendid idea, Phyl. And if it wouldn't be too much work for you, I'm sure you could manage it—you've been so wonderful lately."

"We could all help her," said Shirley eagerly. "It needn't mean such a great deal of extra work, properly organised and managed."

"It would never do," said Cousin Olivia, "for so many young people to live in a house without some suitable older person to look after them."

"Well," said Rene, "we might easily secure one boarder old enough and kind enough, and otherwise suitable, to be 'Aunt Propriety' to the rest."

There was silence—an obviously encouraging silence.

"I don't intend to have a boarding-house all my life," said Phyllis, "but in a few years the boys will be older, and—things will be gradually changing and bettering, I hope, for us. We can wait, though, for the future to unfold itself before we need make plans for it, and if we attend to the present wisely the future is sure to unfold itself well."

"Phyllis dear, I hardly expected you to talk and think in this way," said Myra. "It's just splendid of you."

There was a smile in Phyl's enigmatic eyes.

"I'm not gifted in the same way as Rene and Shirley," she said. "I'm quite clever, of course—we're all clever. But, after a—er—a little deliberation on the subject, I've discovered that I was born to make a brilliant success of any prosaic and useful occupation that I take up, and so it will never be the wrong thing—whether it's a boarding-house or, some day, as it might be, poultry-farming or even—er—*pig-raising*, say."

The smile still in her eyes, she concluded her speech, her tone and her final words a little suggestive of flippancy, perhaps, but the whole essence of it very serious.

And she scarcely noted the effect upon the others of what she had said. She was gazing so earnestly into the future, and back over her baffled, puzzled young girlhood.

Rene and Shirley, in their enthusiasm, gratitude, hope and relief, had almost forgotten the relations, but now Mrs. Bennett spoke, voicing, fortunately, the opinion of them all.

"Well, I think perhaps it might be tried," she said slowly. "And if it doesn't succeed—well, *then*——"

"It will succeed," Phyllis assured them confidently. "Just you watch. We *must* stick together, you see!"

CHAPTER XXVI

ADAM HEARS HIS STORY

AND it did succeed. In order that they might remain together, they were all determined that it should succeed. With Phyllis working so cleverly, so tirelessly, at the head, and the others in such loving, eager co-operation, it would have been strange, indeed, had the scheme failed.

The professional rooms were taken, at a fair rental, by a dentist whose books Angus kept in order, so earning a little extra money; and the three bedrooms, made vacant by the family utilising the wide and sheltered verandah spaces, were occupied, within a month, by four girls, and that one older boarder, suitable and agreeable to be "Aunt Propriety" to the rest, upon whom the relations had insisted.

She was a charming, fun-loving and yet exceedingly "proper" woman, long widowed, and a teacher of languages at a big school for girls in the city. She had lived for twenty years in an ordinary boarding-house, and, hearing of the Kayles' scheme from a friend of Aunt Beryl, who understood and

liked the Kayles much better than did Aunt Beryl herself, went to see them the very next day, and was so pleased with them, and they with her, that she had entered into occupation of a room at Bushy Lodge within a single week's time.

As for the other boarders, they were four ambitious but by no means wealthy students from the country, who would otherwise have been batching or boarding, in lonely fashion, among uncongenial, uncaring people. They were four girls to whom Bushy Lodge, with its big old garden, and its atmosphere of perfect homeliness, its society of bright, sympathetic, interesting and interested people, proved a happy home indeed. Two were art students, friends of Rene, to whom the studio in the garden was a much-appreciated convenience. The other two were university undergraduates, whom Mrs. Grey ("Aunt Propriety") introduced.

They were a congenial company, glad to live simply, content to do the share of work which the rules required of them, and which, though it involved but little exertion for each, meant considerable time and labour saved to the young head of the establishment.

Phyllis, with the help of the maid they were now able to afford, provided her enlarged family with a simple "nursery breakfast," as she called it, which they much preferred to the usual boarding-house meal.

They were all away for lunch, and home for dinner, a happy function, at which was told many a tale of the day's work and adventures—generally humorous, these, because they were young, buoyant folk, and Mrs. Grey had kept her heart young by association and never-failing sympathy with young people.

Phyllis was very busy in these days, but she was not overworked, and never at a loss to cope successfully with her responsibilities. They required talents of organisation, tact, clear-sightedness, and business capacity, which neither she nor her family had hitherto dreamed of her possessing in such a degree.

The appreciation of her own people, and of the other inmates of the house, her own consciousness of her capability for achievement in this sphere of work, stimulated and inspired her. She felt sure that each of these people, unknown to her hitherto, who had come to live at Bushy Lodge, were happier, and would be made stronger, and better, and more effective forces in the world, because of the atmosphere of homeliness, sympathy, and wholesome brightness that pervaded the house.

And schemes for such work as this, on a larger, perfected scale, began to occupy her mind. They led her to devour books on sociology and kindred subjects, to formulate

more and more schemes, crude and chaotic yet, but growing ever more definite and feasible in her mind, for the helping and greater happiness of the world's workers.

But for the present her work at Bushy Lodge satisfied her completely. She said nothing to the others of her growing plans and hopes, only tended them all with good-humour and a wisdom which was, and yet did not seem, beyond her years.

It was in January of the new year that David Chester and Adam Deering returned to Australia—David, after a prolonged rest, to take up home service at one of the local military camps, Adam to receive his discharge, and become a civilian again.

Nancy and Chris were half wild with excitement as the date of their return drew near.

They knew that it was Adam's chance finding, on No Man's Land, of a letter from Nancy to David, which had indirectly led to the latter being rescued by their hero, and it was very pleasant to be termed, in consequence, by Vieve, the good fairies of her life. Chris shared in the praise because she had written to David as often as Nancy had done, and it might just as easily have been a letter from her instead of from Nancy, drifting about for Adam's enlightenment on No Man's Land that day.

But they wondered rather anxiously what

particular letter it was that Adam had read—he had made no reference to it in the notes he had written to them from hospital—and they hoped that he had not read the whole of it, since it was almost certain to have contained some reference to himself which it would be distinctly embarrassing to them for him to have seen.

“I wonder was he really out seeking death on No Man’s Land when he found my letter?” Nancy said to Chris one day. “Of course, after he found Mr. Chester he had to try and get back safely for Mr. Chester’s sake. And now, you see— isn’t it beautiful, Chris?—he is removed for ever from the sights and sounds of the battlefield, and all its temptations. The one thing I fear is that his wound might break out afresh as he enters Sydney Heads once more.”

“Do you mean the place might begin bleeding again, where his arm was cut off?” asked Chris.

“No, silly; his heart,” answered Nancy. “Can’t you imagine how he will feel when he comes in sight of the city where dwells the woman who was so false to him?—Oh, I wonder what he will say when he sees us, Chris?” she finished excitedly.

It was a thrilling prospect which they were never tired of discussing.

Adam called at The Anchorage a few days

after his arrival in Sydney. Nancy happened to be standing in the hall when the maid opened the door in answer to his ring; she gave him one startled glance of recognition, then turned, and flew wildly upstairs.

"Oh, Chris," she exclaimed, in a voice that was perfectly audible to the soldier at the door, "it's Adam Deering! It's Adam Deering! Whatever *shall* we do? It's Adam Deering!"

"If you don't mind," called Adam's laughing voice from the foot of the stairs, "I'd very much like you to come down and speak to me. I promise I won't cut your heads off if you do."

Chris drew a long breath.

"Say something, for goodness' sake, Nancy," she whispered. "You're eldest."

Nancy cast a bitter look upon her sister, and went towards the head of the stairs.

"Chris and I will be down in a minute," she called in trembling accents. "Mother's out, but if you'll just go into the drawing-room, and wait for us—we—we'll be down in a minute."

"Right," said Adam. "But come on down straight-away, won't you?"

Thus adjured, hand in hand, they came, two subdued and shyly smiling little girls, trying to keep their eyes from that empty left sleeve in his coat, for fear he minded very much about it.

He seemed quite a genial soldier now, not at all like the gloomy, reckless-looking man they fancied they remembered.

"Our letters must have helped to heal his broken heart, after all," was the exultant thought in the mind of each as they talked to him.

And indeed his voice was very sincere and earnest as he told them what a pleasure to him those letters had been, how he had grown to look for them, how they had cheered him up in some of the bad times "over there."

"Yes," said Chris complacently, "that's what we wrote them for."

Nancy flashed her a warning glance.

"I can't tell you how much they meant to me," said Adam.

He was thinking of the joy those letters had given him in telling him so much about their music-teacher, whose photograph they had once sent him.

"But there's just one thing I'm a bit puzzled about," continued Adam. "I suppose you have heard that I happened to pick up a letter from one of you to Lieutenant Chester. I was a bit bored out there, you see, with nothing to do, and nothing to read all day, so I read that letter—I didn't think you would mind—and I found something about myself in it which made me very curious."

Nancy and Chris were blushing deeply.

"We really told Mr. Chester as little about

it as possible," said Nancy in a desperate tone. "We had to tell him just a bit, but we never mentioned—er—er—her *name* or—or actually what was the matter with you."

She looked at him distressedly. She had expected him to grow pale, and wince at her words. But he didn't.

"Yes," said Adam. "Chester told me, when I asked him about it over in England, that he hadn't been let into the secret, but I hope you'll tell *me* a bit more, for you see I didn't know, until I read that letter, what a very blighted chap I was, and as for knowing who broke my poor old heart—well, you've got me there, too!"

They looked greatly taken aback at this, as well they might. But Nancy's expression changed swiftly to one of sympathetic understanding.

"Of course I knew that you would wish to hide it from the peering eyes of the world," she said, "but don't count us, please. We can't help knowing, now. Rita Kenning told us all about it, you see, from beginning to end, and it made us awfully angry with Miss—er—you know—*her*. And we wouldn't give her a wedding-present when she got married to Mr. Hartridge, and we were dreadfully miserable and worried about you."

But Adam's continued bewilderment was so genuine as to be convincing, however unaccountable it seemed.

There was nothing for it but to tell him the full story of Rita's confidences, so that there should be no misunderstanding between them.

Adam was deeply interested, rather concerned, highly amused, and not a little touched, as he heard it.

"It was a great stroke of luck for me that you fancied me so badly in need of comfort," he said, "for I have never enjoyed anything so much in my life as that beautiful balm you poured on my heart. It soaked in, all right, and felt very nice, but I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear that there wasn't even a crack in it, and that I never harboured any unwholesome yearning for death. I'm sorry you've been thinking such hard things about poor old Ida, though—Mrs. Hartridge, you know. I'd like to give that silly little Rita a shaking, and yet I ought to be grateful to her, so I won't."

That evening the two girls posted to Miss Rita Kenning a belated New Year card conveying friendly greetings from Nancy and Chris Russell; and Mrs. Gordon Hartridge was astonished to receive, also by post, a few days later, a little parcel containing a butter-knife and jam spoon, to which was tied, with white ribbon, a card inscribed :

"With best wishes for future happiness from us Both."

CHAPTER XXVII

TIT FOR TAT

SHIRLEY had accepted an invitation to dinner at the brown bungalow, to meet David Chester and Adam Deering, on the first Saturday evening after the arrival of the two wounded heroes in Sydney.

"I couldn't get out of it," she said to her sisters, "and I didn't really want to, either. That affair of the tar is comfortably old, now. I'm afraid I shall remember it with much inward embarrassment when we meet, and I suppose he will, too; but Time has toned it down to a joke, surely, and I think the best thing to do will be to allude to it frankly at the first opportunity."

"And tell him from me," said Phyllis, "that he is quite welcome to put tar on his boots, and ramp all over my house in them if it would give him any pleasure, in consideration of what he has done on the other side of the world. Geniuses have their eccentricities, as *I* can testify, so why shouldn't heroes be humoured in theirs?"

Shirley happened to meet Doctor Deering

on Friday morning. She had been out giving a music-lesson, and was returning to Bushy Lodge with a great bunch of roses from the pupil's garden, when the doctor came along the road in his car, going the same way homeward to lunch.

As soon as he saw her he stopped.

"Jump in," he bade her. "There's no attraction about walking in such heat as this, is there?"

"None whatever," agreed Shirley gratefully. "And I'm very glad for my roses to be saved so much sun and wind."

"I suppose you know my boy got back on Monday?" said the old man, as the car sped forward again.

Shirley nodded, and smiled sympathetically.

"Yes, you must be delighted about it—and how proud you must feel, too, of his heroism!"

"Well, I can't say I'm at all disappointed in him," admitted the doctor, with a smile. "It's a great pity they've winged him, and spoiled his chance of doing any more at the Front, but from my own personal point of view, I'm very glad and thankful to have him back again. I say, I know what a busy little lady you are, but do you think you and your sisters could come along to our place and play tennis some Saturday? I'd like you to meet my boy."

"Thank you," said Shirley. "We'd be

very pleased to come. I am to meet your son to-morrow evening at Mrs. Chester's, though; I suppose you will be there too."

"No, I shan't be able to get away. That Chester is a fine fellow; I had a long talk with him yesterday. His health's a bit smashed up for the present, but he has a good constitution, and will be pretty nearly as well as ever in time, I believe. By the way, my boy brought a few interesting souvenirs back with him; how about coming round with me now, and having a look at them?"

"I should love to see them some day," answered Shirley, "but I really must hurry home now."

"Well, we're going at a pretty good pace," he retorted, "and it would have taken you half an hour to walk home. You could see those things in a few minutes, and I'd like to show them to you—you'd be so interested in 'em, I know."

But Shirley was not prepared to meet Adam to-day.

"I think I had better leave it for some other time," she said. "Your son might be busy this morning."

"Adam isn't there," responded the doctor—"said he didn't think he'd be home before this evening. Oh, well, just please yourself, of course. It would be better, I suppose, to see them when the boy's at home, as he

could explain everything to you better than I could."

But Shirley noted the disappointment in his voice.

"You understand how it is, don't you?" he added. "I'm such an eager old fool where anything connected with Adam is concerned."

Shirley looked at her watch.

"I thought it was later," she said; "I shall have time to go round now, after all, and thank you very much. I'm sure you know just as much about those trophies as your son does."

"I believe I do," he laughed. His face had brightened over her altered decision; he was, indeed, in some respects, a very boyish old man.

A few minutes later, he was leading the way through his house to Adam's "den," just behind his own consulting-room.

It opened on to a side verandah, and was a big, pleasant room, rather sparsely furnished, except for its hundreds of books, standing in orderly rows on shelves at intervals round its four sides, and in a revolving case in the middle. There was an open, roll-top desk, the pigeon-holes of which were tidily crammed with papers, and over by the window was a table covered with chemicals and various appliances which were a complete mystery to Shirley.

"This is where he reads and writes, works and plays," said the doctor proudly. "Would you believe it?—the boy was over at that table, busy with some experiment or other, the first night he was back here; he runs a lot of hobbies in this room, yet he has never had it littered up in his life. He's as neat and orderly in the way he keeps his things as any old maid. Nobody ever has to tidy up after Adam; the maids say they have never known anyone like him in that respect, and his soldiering hasn't knocked it out of him. I believe untidiness or disarrangement of his rooms is about the only trivial thing that could put him in a temper."

"Is it, indeed?" exclaimed Shirley interestedly, and into her eyes came a little gleam of laughter and wickedness, which the doctor did not see. The next moment three petals from a full-blown rose in her bunch fell to the floor.

The doctor was opening a drawer in a bureau, and taking out some of the things it held.

There were in Adam's collection of war trophies empty cartridges innumerable, from Gallipoli and France, the bolt from a Turkish sniper's rifle, German pocket-books, full of German writing, Turks' caps, German helmets, a piece of twisted piping from a ruined cathedral in France, several shrapnel bullets and bits of shell which had "just missed"

Adam, little pathetic presents from French village folk, dozens of regimental badges, and so on. It was the usual collection of trophies, familiar in so many homes from which men have gone forth to play their part in the Great War.

Shirley listened with deep interest, as the old man proudly exhibited, and told her little anecdotes concerning, the souvenirs, following him from one side to another of the room to look at this thing and that thing which he called her to inspect.

Several more of those full-blown roses in her bunch shed their petals upon Adam's floor as she moved about, and a ball of the wet tissue-paper that had bound them dropped from her hand too, then a bit of string, and two old tram tickets.

But the doctor did not notice; he was too deeply interested in all he had to tell and show her, as Shirley knew.

"And now, I really must go," said she, at last.

"Well, I believe I've shown you about all he has unpacked so far. I hope I haven't kept you too late, but it's an interesting lot of things, don't you think?—the sort of little collection a young man of these times should have to hand down to his children and his children's children, in the better years to come, eh?"

"Indeed, yes," answered Shirley.

They were at the front entrance again when the sound of quick footsteps across the room they had left the minute before reached their ears.

The doctor paused, listening, and Shirley's heart gave a frightened leap.

"Halloa, that sounds like Adam, home to lunch after all," said the doctor. "I think I'll make you stay and have it with us."

A moment later there was no doubt about Adam being home, for a voice called loudly :

"Martha ! I say, *Martha* ! Who the dickens has been in my room messing up the floor like this with flowers and rubbish ? "

The doctor and Shirley looked at each other, with startled expressions, and then a maid, who had hurried along the side passage to Adam's door, answered, before it had occurred to the old man to forestall her :

"Your father was in here with a young lady a few minutes ago, Mr. Deering, showing her the things you brought back from the War; she has only just gone."

"Well, all I have to say about that young lady is that she was a jolly untidy little minx ! " declared Adam heartily.

"Adam, you scoundrel, come here ! " called the doctor. His eyes were twinkling merrily.

But Shirley broke away with a breathless laugh.

“ Oh, I shan’t wait; I’m too frightened ! ” she exclaimed. “ Good-bye.”

And she flew off to the gate, without one backward glance.

She did not slacken her speed till she had turned the corner, when she paused for a moment to regain breath, and then proceeded, in more leisurely fashion, to Bushy Lodge, laughing softly and delightedly all the way.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A BUGLE CALL

GENEVIEVE had just introduced to each other Adam Deering and Shirley Kayle.

"I am so glad to meet you, Mr. Deering," said Shirley. "I have heard a great deal about you, of course."

"I suppose so," said Adam confusedly. "Er—I mean—have you really?"

Poor Adam.

But Shirley was not so embarrassed. It was wonderful how much it helped her to remember that she had heard him call her a little minx only yesterday.

The drawing-room at the brown bungalow was full of happy people.

There was David Chester, tall, fair, no longer boyish-looking, for his face was thinner than it had been two years ago, and a little lined. But his eyes had not lost—perhaps they had just lately regained—their expression of happiness, most evident when they rested upon his wife. And his glance followed her a good deal as she moved about the room, with a pleasant effect of noting and admiring her least action.

Mrs. Russell was there, talking to Mr. Mason, who beamed in kindly fashion upon everybody.

There was Mrs. Kenneth Stone, too, the chief friend of Genevieve's girlhood, a pretty, clever-looking little lady, whose husband was away fighting on the dreary Somme. But her eyes were very bright to-day in rejoicing over Genevieve's happiness, and in visioning scenes of reunion, near or distant, with her own soldier.

Gilbert Mason, nearly fifteen now, and much overgrown for his age, was talking to her about "over there." He told her that this would be, beyond a doubt, the last war-winter, and, in support of the comforting statement, he supplied her with numerous arguments, to which she listened wistfully and gratefully. His eyes kindled as he went on. He was so well practised in the art of "cheering up" in such circumstances as these that he fell quite naturally and easily into conversation with this little lady, stranger though she was to him. Twelve months ago he would have been tongue-tied in her presence. But a year of school-life, and his self-imposed duties in connection with the office of guardian to a soldier's wife, had done much to rid the boy of his awkward shyness, and he had accepted Vieve's invitation to dinner at the bungalow this evening with alacrity

Nancy and Chris hovered adoringly between David and Adam. Of course this informal little party would not have been complete without them, and so the rule which forbids children to go out dining with grown-up folks had had to be broken on this occasion.

Shirley was placed beside Adam at dinner, but the conversation, before and during the meal, was general, and at the end of it neither had spoken a word to each other of those episodes of a year before, and a day before, they had been introduced. They talked together just as new and congenial acquaintances do, and everybody would have been surprised to learn that a year ago Shirley had termed Adam, in his hearing, a great big lout, and that, a day ago, Adam had described Shirley as an untidy little minx.

After dinner they all wandered round the moonlit garden, and David told them just how much each tree in it had grown during his absence.

Mr. Mason excused himself and took his departure before the little company returned to the house. He never went out visiting, as a rule, but this had been a special occasion for which he had been induced to make an exception.

Nancy and Chris had drawn Gilbert into a game of hide-and-seek, which was in full swing when the others walked back towards the

house. Mrs. Russell and Mrs. Stone lingered talking on the lawn—for these two were old friends who seldom met, and had much to tell each other of the news in the letters that came to them from over the sea.

The four others paused, further along the lawn, near the verandah, for a few minutes, then Vieve drifted inside, and began to play a waltz. David followed presently, to light the gas. He stayed, to rummage through the music, and pick out the songs he wished Vieve to sing later.

All around the garden Shirley and Adam had gone, and a dozen opportunities had been theirs to mention those embarrassing episodes of a year ago and a day ago, of which they wished to speak—a dozen opportunities which they had unaccountably let pass.

Out in the garden, the game of hide-and-seek had come to an end, and Nancy had just asked :

“Do you ever play your bugle now, Gilbert?”

“Now and then,” he answered.

“You ought to be able to play it in tune by this time,” observed Chris. “Can you, Gilbert?”

“Yes,” he said, in his old laconic way.

“I wish you would run home and get it,” said Nancy, “and play some calls for us, just to let us hear how much you have improved.”

“Can’t be bothered,” returned Gilbert.

He was really as high-and-mighty, upon occasions, as any other boy.

"Oh, yes, you can," pleaded Chris. "Go on, Gilbert, we do want to hear you. Run and get it, *please*."

"Of course I won't!" retorted Gilbert. "The others would all think I was showing off, or gone mad, if I did."

"No they wouldn't, and it would be a sort of military compliment to the two brave soldiers just back from the War," Nancy told him. "Just play one call, Gilbert—to please us."

"Don't be nasty, Gilbert," said Chris.

He didn't want to play—he was really afraid the others would think he was "showing off" if he did, but he was still—perhaps he always would be—helplessly indulgent of feminine caprices.

"Oh, all right, you little sillies!" he said.

On the lawn, Shirley, her courage sufficiently in her possession at last, was saying to Adam:

"I must apologise for ramping around your study so untidily yesterday morning. I am afraid I *was* a very careless little minx to let so many of my roses fall to pieces there."

Adam laughed in relief, and became suddenly bold.

"You funny little thing," he said; "you did it to pay me out, of course. If only I had known it was you!"

"You can't think how delighted I was to hear you call me a minx!" she said. "It made me feel quite comfortable over what I had said about you, a year ago—I'm afraid you *do* remember?"

"Remember! Listen," said Adam. His eyes were reckless, his words came in a tempestuous rush. (And usually such a self-possessed, cool, deliberate fellow was Adam!)

"Before the day I put tar on your floor, and made you cry—Jove! how I wanted to slaughter myself for that!—from the very moment I saw you first in Fall's Tea Room; over in Egypt, over in France, in hospital in England, on the way home to Sydney—your little feet have been ramping and stamping mercilessly all over my heart. You've got me beaten and down, and you're ramping and stamping still."

Shirley had listened in amazement, her eyes wide and startled, her face grown suddenly white. And as he spoke, and as he paused, the music from the drawing-room seemed queerly to hem them in, to rob her of power to speak a word.

But then, far down the garden, a sharp, clear bugle call rang out.

"Oh, listen," she said relievedly. "That's Gilbert playing his bugle."

"Of course," broke out Adam again, impetuously, ignoring her words, "you only

know me as a rough soldier and a clumsy lout, but, for you, and because of you, I could be all sorts of fine things besides—if—if you felt you could ever give me the ghost of a hope——”

“Oh, hush, Mr. Deering,” said Shirley breathlessly. “Let’s—let’s go inside. Why—we—we’ve only just met each other. It’s crazy of you.”

“So it is,” agreed Adam, suddenly becoming sober and sane, and aghast at his own mad presumption. “Forgive me, little Miss Kayle, if you can. I—I *am* only a clumsy lout, and I’ve frightened you for good now, and ruined any feeble chance I might ever have earned, by butting in like this.”

He rose, smiling whimsically, ruefully.

“Ignominious retreat,” he said, but there was unhappiness in his eyes.

Once more the bugle call sounded in the garden.

This time Adam heard it, raised his head, and listened to it, drew a quick breath, and turned to her.

“Do you know that call?” he asked her.

“I’m afraid I don’t,” answered Shirley, glad to be back on safe conversational ground.

“I can recognise hardly any of the calls by name, although I know the airs of every one.”

“Why, that’s the Advance!” said Adam.

“Oh,” said she, and saw his face in the

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